INSIDE INDIA'S DEEP OCEAN MISSION

FALGUNI NAYAR GRIT & GLORY

OMICRON THREAT HOW SERIOUS?

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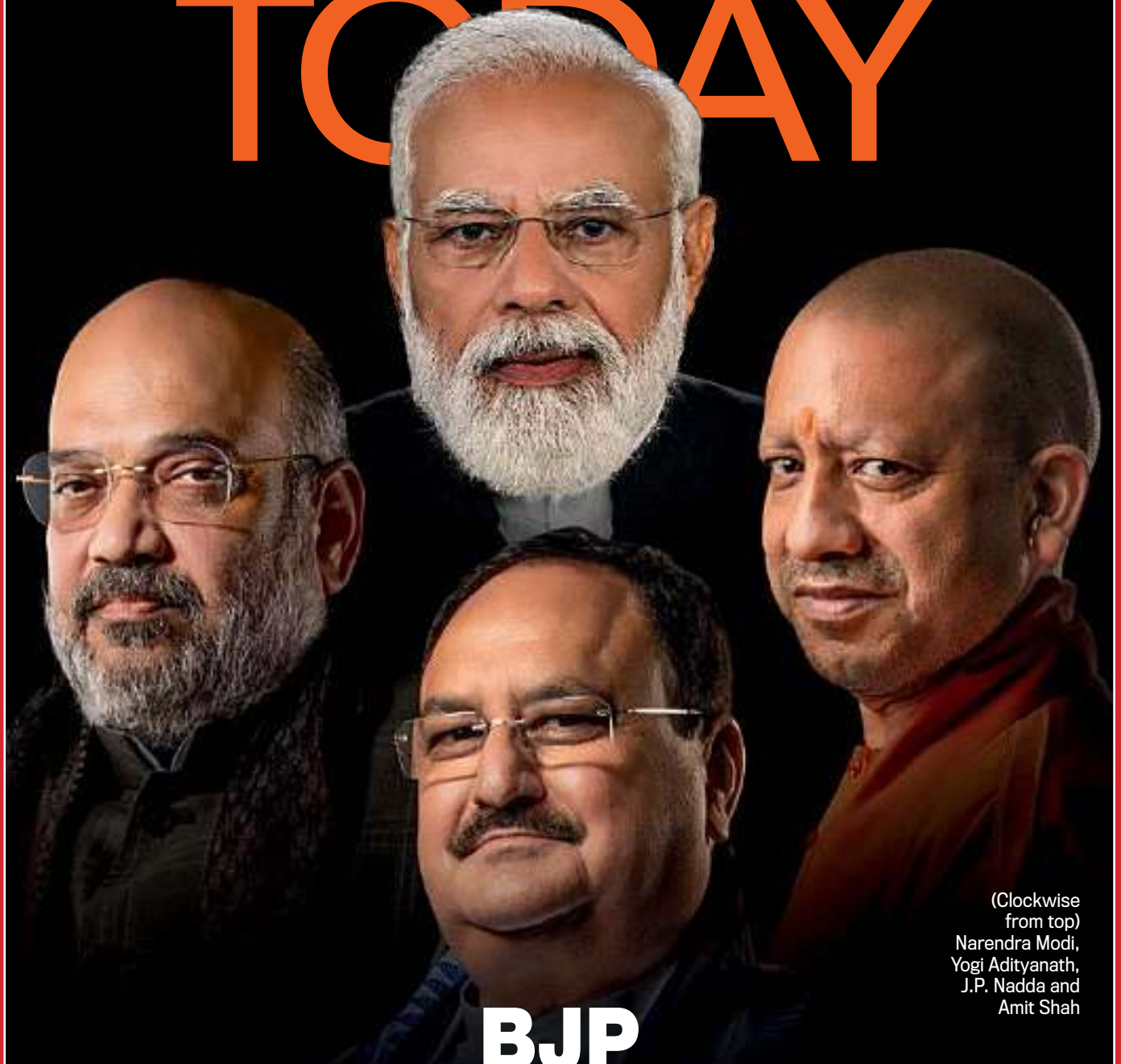

(Clockwise from top) Narendra Modi, Yogi Adityanath, J.P. Nadda and Amit Shah

BJP MISSION 2022

How the party is calibrating its electoral strategy in the crucial Uttar Pradesh polls and beyond to overcome anti-incumbency and economic challenges. Plus: Interview with BJP president J.P. Nadda

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VISIT…

FROM THE

EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

This April, I predicted what the BJP would do if it lost the election in West Bengal—return to the drawing board to recast its strategy for the next round of elections. Two months from now, five states—Uttar Pradesh, Goa, Manipur, Uttarakhand and Punjab—go to the polls. Later in the year, it will be the turn of Himachal Pradesh and Gujarat. The BJP is already in campaign mode, with tailor-made strategies for each state.

My prediction was not particularly prescient. That's been the nature of the new BJP over the past seven and a half years. The party, rebuilt by Prime Minister Narendra Modi and former party president Amit Shah, is an adaptable, resilient and tireless election machine. It seldom rests and is undeterred by adversity. Instead, it learns from each defeat and returns to the arena. It is forever in campaign and mission mode.

On November 30 this year, Prime Minister Modi's government hit the mid-point of its second term. Just 27 months from now, his government will be in the thick of the 2024 Lok Sabha election. Between now and then is an electoral highway marked with two milestones—2022 and 2023—when large states like Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Karnataka and Chhattisgarh will face elections.

But first, the critical 2022 elections. The second wave of the pandemic struck even as the West Bengal election was under way. UP saw a spike in infections and deaths; Punjab had the highest mortality rate while Goa and Uttarakhand's tourism-dependent economies were devastated. The pandemic exposed the vulnerabilities of the central as well as the state governments. The polls early next year will thus be the first electoral referendum on the government's handling of the second wave.

The BJP is in power in six of the seven poll-bound states—it is thus a verdict on the party itself. The largest, UP, is India's most electorally significant state. The BJP won the previous election here by a landslide. If it fails to repeat its performance, it could impact the results of the July 2022 election of the President of India. These five states account for 10 per cent of the electoral college that elects the President. It could become a problem for the BJP if its seats diminish substantially in the various Vidhan Sabhas. On these elections also hinges the NDA's quest for a majority in the Rajya Sabha. Sixteen of the 74 seats in the Upper House due for elections early next year are from three of these states.

The BJP is not being complacent. Over the past few months, the party has taken some difficult decisions, all of them with a focus on the upcoming elections. In September, it brought in a new chief minister, Bhupendra Patel, in Gujarat and, earlier in July, filled the central cabinet with fresh faces. In November, the government reduced excise duties on diesel and petrol. The prime minister also announced the repeal of its three contentious central farm laws.

June 6, 2016

April 12, 2021

The party has a detailed strategy for the upcoming polls. At the macro and micro levels, that will be to tick all the boxes. At the macro level, it has fine-tuned caste equations by ensuring their representation in the reshuffled council of ministers. It has appointed state office-bearers and is in search of a younger, educated leadership, especially among women, OBCs, Dalits and tribal people. It is playing up its favourite Hindutva card by showcasing the construction of the Ram temple in Ayodhya and the redevelopment of Kashi. In UP, where it is playing up the development plank, it has divided the state into six zones, treating each as a separate state, with a different strategy. In Punjab, where it parted ways with one of its oldest allies, the Akali Dal, the party is working with former CM Amarinder Singh's newly-floated party. In Uttarakhand, where it has had three chief ministers in the current term, it hopes the third, Pushkar Singh Dhami, can make a difference.

The BJP has begun an aggressive grassroots thrust that employs technology ranging from WhatsApp groups to voice-modulated messages. Amit Shah, as BJP president, had mobilised the party worker for booth management and wooing voters. The incumbent, J.P. Nadda, has extended it to the smaller sub-unit, the *panna pramukh* or the 'page committee', tasked with handling voters on the page of an electoral roll. When faced with a shortage of health workers, the BJP roped in its cadres for a 'Sewa Hi Sangathan' outreach campaign in May this year.

The party has yet to overcome its handicap of excessive reliance on Brand Modi as its campaign mascot. This works well in the Lok Sabha election but not so well in state elections because voters vote differently for states and the Centre. As Mamata Banerjee showed in the West Bengal election, a dogged regional challenger can halt the BJP's electoral juggernaut.

Our cover story, 'Mission 2022', by Senior Editor Anilesh S. Mahajan, examines the nuts and bolts of the BJP's new electoral machinery and the blueprint of its recast poll strategy for 2022. The BJP starts with an advantage in any election as it has the four essential ingredients for electoral success—money, organisational strength, a clear ideology and a popular national leader as a mascot. The Opposition parties flounder on most of these counts. That said, elections are still all about choice, and even the most powerful leaders and political parties must go before the electorate with their heads bowed to seek the popular mandate. That's the beauty of India's democracy.

(Aroon Purie)

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THE SIZE OF IT
A healthcare worker with a sample at the Genome Sequencing and RT-PCR Lab at the Directorate of Medical and Rural Health Services campus in Chennai

ANI

COVID-19

...AND NOW, OMICRON

By Amarnath K. Menon & M.G. Arun

Barely a fortnight after news broke of a new Covid-19 'variant of concern'—code-named 'Omicron' and first reported to the WHO (World Health Organization) by South Africa on November 24—and even before a single case has been reported in the country, India is scrambling to implement measures to contain what some say is the most contagious variant yet. At the national level, these include travel advisories and stricter testing and quarantine guidelines for travellers, while several states have imposed additional restrictions of their own.

At the time of writing, there were few certainties about the Omicron variant. Virologists say they hope to have a better understanding of the danger posed by this strain by mid-December, including how quickly it spreads, the expected severity of symptoms and how effective existing vaccines are against it. However, the fact that such a variant has emerged appears to confirm earlier warnings that Covid-19, like swine flu, could become an endemic disease, with regular mutations and cyclic spikes in case numbers in vulnerable areas.

The emergence of the Omicron variant has also sparked off debate about whether a third dose of Covid-19 vaccines should be administered in India, even though half the eligible adult population is yet to receive a second dose—a fact that highlights the country's slow vaccine rollout. The US and the UK have approved booster doses for all adults, to be administered six months after the second dose. (However, in the UK, this is limited to those above the

age of 40 or with medical conditions that suppress natural immunity.) "The National Technical Advisory Group on Immunisation [will issue] a comprehensive policy on booster doses in the next two weeks," says Dr N.K. Arora, chairman of the national Covid-19 task force. "It will [address] who requires [a booster dose of the] vaccine, when and how." What is equally important is the development of new vaccines if the Omicron variant proves capable of evading the protection offered by those currently available and in use.

The WHO has issued warnings that Omicron is likely to spread across the globe, and poses a very high risk of creating case surges that could have 'severe consequences' in vulnerable areas. Regardless of how severe these cases are, a sudden surge in case numbers could overwhelm healthcare systems, leading to a spike in mortality rates. Though no Omicron-linked deaths have been reported so far, the medical community is scrambling to ascertain its damage potential and the defensive capabilities of the vaccine shots people have already received. In anticipation of a surge in case numbers, the WHO says it is imperative to accelerate the vaccination of high priority groups and ensure plans are in place to strengthen health services in vulnerable areas. It has also suggested heightened surveillance to contain the spread.

While it is too early to judge the global economic impact, many countries have put new restrictions on international travel. This is worrying news for a world just emerging from the devastating effects of two major Covid waves in less than two years. If the threat perception grows, and leads to fresh trade restrictions, economic recovery will be collaterally affected; seamless supply chains are crucial, after all, in an interconnected, interdependent global economy. Indian stock markets have already seen volatility. Worried investors have been on a selling spree—on November 26, the BSE (Bombay Stock Exchange) Sensex fell over 1,688 points, closing at 57,107. The same day, the NSE (National Stock Exchange) Nifty 50 lost 509.8 points, closing at 17,026. "Everyone thought the risk was shifting from the pandemic to issues like inflation, but the latest events signal the virus is still around and making its impact felt," says D.K. Joshi, chief economist with Crisil.

On a positive note, lessons learned from the first and second waves of Covid-19 have made governments and businesses better prepared to handle the virus. For instance, during the second wave earlier this year, the Centre left it to the states to decide on local lockdowns, after the devastating experience of the national lockdown during the first wave. This made it possible for businesses and factories in areas of lower Covid incidence to operate under looser restrictions, helping the economy rebound faster than expected.

Economists are hopeful Omicron will not stall economic recovery. However, fast-tracking India's vaccination drive (nearly 40 per cent of India's population has been fully vaccinated) will be crucial to keep economic activity going. Nearly every industrialist we spoke to underlined the need for another push to increase vaccination rates. "It's too bad that after achieving such a good vaccination rate in August and September, we have seen such a big drop in October and November—almost as if we have declared victory," says Naushad Forbes, co-chairman of Forbes Marshall. "Improving vaccination rates should be our priority and focus."

In a report, S&P Global, a ratings agency, said countries in the Asia-Pacific region are on a weaker recovery path than the rest of the world, primarily because these economies, including India, have been slow to vaccinate. Morgan Stanley also said India might again have to consider lockdowns depending on the spread of the new variant, and that these could have a big impact on growth. The report has warned of a disruption of global supply chains, saying, 'During the Delta wave, for instance, production activities in India and the ASEAN bloc of countries were affected more than in North Asia. We could see a repeat.'

At the moment, though, more than any health parameters, it is the new travel restrictions, in wary anticipation of the worst, that are raising concern. For example, India is reviewing earlier plans to resume regular international flights from December 15. On November 29, Australia abruptly halted plans to reopen its borders to international workers and students—the re-opening will now be delayed by at least two weeks. Several countries, including Japan, Israel and Singapore, have banned the entry of all foreigners or imposed curbs on inbound travel from Omicron-affected countries. The variant has so far been found in at least 20 countries, as per media reports, including the UK, Germany, Netherlands, Denmark, Italy and Australia. As more countries come under its shadow, the Omicron impact on the global economy, and especially the travel sector, will grow. ■

FAST FACTS

CONTACT: The Omicron variant was first **reported in South Africa on Nov. 24**, while the first confirmed sample was **collected on Nov. 9**. It has since been detected in Australia, Switzerland, Belgium, the UK and Israel, among other countries

CONCERN: The new strain has **many mutations, including about 30 on its spike** (the part that latches on to human host cells). Since vaccines train the immune system to recognise the virus by its spike, there are fears that Omicron could evade the protection of existing vaccines. The identification of Omicron coincided with a surge in cases in South Africa, from **273 on Nov. 16 to over 1,200 on Nov. 25**

CONTAGION: In an interview, virologist Dr Gagandeep Kang said the original **Wuhan strain had an R0 of around 2.5**, while **Delta was between 6.5 and 8** (for unvaccinated people who have never had Covid). She said early estimates of Omicron's R0 value put it "**several times [higher than] Delta**", and that while she thought this was "unlikely to be the case", it "[Omicron] does appear to be a highly transmissible variant"

Sources: WHO, Media reports

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

GLASSHOUSE

BEND IT LIKE BABUL

Babul Supriyo, the BJP member of Parliament who crossed over to the Trinamool Congress in September, was being tipped for high office in Didi's party. Like being the mayoral candidate in the upcoming Kolkata Municipal Corporation (KMC) election, replacing incumbent Firhad Hakim. Supriyo's periodic tweets professing love for the city provided more grist to this rumour mill. To no avail, though, for he didn't make it to the list of KMC candidates, whereas Hakim did. Babul isn't giving up. He was spotted dribbling a football at a local ground while campaigning for a local TMC candidate. Benched, but still in the game.

ANI

Changing Gears

Former Bihar CM **Lalu Prasad Yadav**, 73, raised a Twitter storm recently when he posted a video of him driving his first set of wheels, a jeep purchased in 1977. Twitterati noticed how the ailing RJD supremo, who has sought exemption from court appearances, was fit enough to drive on Patna's Circular Road. A snarky JD(U) spokesperson questioned the missing seat belt and asked if he had a licence. Is Lalu trying to show he's still in the driver's seat in the RJD?

MISSING VETERANS

The defence ministry's year-long celebrations of the 50th anniversary of the 1971 Indo-Pak war will culminate in Vijay Diwas on December 16. The Congress party is planning parallel celebrations to showcase the day as a victory of Indira Gandhi's decisive leadership. Not wanting to be seen at a political event, prominent military veterans have declined to attend. The armed forces are, after all, apolitical.

–Sandeep Unnithan *with Romita Datta, Kiran D. Tare and Amitabh Srivastava*

REBEL RISING?

The late defence minister Manohar Parrikar's son **Utpal Parrikar** wants to contest the upcoming Goa assembly poll on a BJP ticket. Problem is party leaders believe the businessman is a political lightweight. Chief Minister Pramod Sawant and former Maharashtra CM Devendra Fadnavis have in the past successfully dissuaded him from contesting from his father's Panaji constituency. But this time around, Parrikar Jr seems adamant. A rebel in the ranks?

Maha-ximum Mantra

BJP leader **Vinod Tawde** was recently made party national general secretary from Maharashtra. He is only the second leader from the state since the late Pramod Mahajan to rise to the post. Seems his blemish-free stint as the party's Haryana in-charge caught the eye of the central leadership. Tawde could get charge of PM Narendra Modi's newest pet project—popularising August 14 as the Partition Horror Remembrance Day. Good work clearly means more of the same.

PARAM BIR SINGH

EYEING A RETURN TICKET?

By Kiran D. Tare

QUESTION TIME Param Bir Singh speaks to the media after his police interrogation in Mumbai, Nov. 25

ANI

When Param Bir Singh, director general (DG) of the Maharashtra Home Guard, flew down to Mumbai from Chandigarh on November 25—after going missing for 231 days—he had probably made up his mind to face investigation in the extortion cases against him. Singh reached his home in South Mumbai's Malabar Hill, changed to formals and headed for the Kandivali unit of the Mumbai Police crime branch. There he underwent six hours of interrogation by deputy commissioner of police Nilotpal Mishra and a police inspector—junior officers who had reported to Singh till he was unceremoniously removed as Mumbai police chief on March 20.

Singh's return was not voluntary though. The Supreme Court, on November 18, had asked the 1988 batch IPS officer to disclose his whereabouts if he wanted his plea seeking protection from arrest by the Mumbai Police to be heard. A day earlier, a Mumbai court had started the procedure to declare Singh a 'proclaimed offender' in one of the extortion cases. The Supreme Court, on November 22, granted him protection from arrest till December 6 and directed him to join the probe.

Singh claims he was in Chandigarh throughout his absence from Mumbai. While some media reports suggested he was in the US, Nepal or Switzerland, Singh's brother Manbir Singh Bhadana, a resident of Chandigarh, says Singh had stayed with him for three months. "Then he moved out; we don't know where. We have not been in touch with him for close to three months now," *The Indian Express* recently quoted Bhadana as saying.

The extortion cases against Singh are from Mumbai and Thane. In August 2021, a real estate developer, Bimal Agarwal, filed an extortion complaint against Singh, Sachin Vaze (the dismissed assistant police inspector, considered to be close to Singh) and four others, namely Sumit Singh alias Chintu, Alpesh Patel, Vinay Singh and Riyaz Bhati. Agarwal alleged that they

had extorted Rs 9 lakh from him in 2020 as protection against raids on his two bars and restaurants in Goregaon, a suburb of Mumbai. Agarwal also alleged he was forced to provide them high-end smartphones worth Rs 2.9 lakh. Another builder, Thane-based Ketan Tanna, filed a complaint in April this year that Singh and retired assistant commissioner of police Pradeep Sharma had extorted crores from him and his friend Sonu Jalan in 2018, when both Singh and Sharma were posted in Thane.

A calculated move?

Singh has expressed faith in the judiciary and declined to comment on the cases. "I am here to join the investigation as per the directions of the Supreme Court. I will speak in court," he told India Today TV.

Well before his return, Singh had begun trying to mend fences with the Maharashtra Vikas Aghadi (MVA) government over his allegations of extortion against former home minister and NCP (Nationalist Congress Party) leader Anil Deshmukh. In an affidavit filed in October before a judicial commission, headed by retired Justice K.U. Chandiwal, which is probing whether Deshmukh had misused his ministerial powers, Singh has stated that he had no evidence to back his claim that Deshmukh had asked him to collect Rs 100 crore every month from bars and restaurants in Mumbai. 'I do not want to say anything other than what I have mentioned in the letter to the chief minister (Uddhav Thackeray),' the affidavit stated. Singh had made the allegations against Deshmukh in a letter to Thackeray on March 17.

A senior Mumbai police officer privy to Singh's interrogation on November 25 claims he has blamed Vaze for the alleged extortions and clarified that he never asked the officer to conduct raids on any bar or restaurant in Mumbai. Vaze is in judicial custody since June 1 in the case of Thane businessman Mansukh Hiran's murder. Hiran's body was found in Thane on March 5 within days of the recovery of an SUV carrying explosives from near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's home, Antilia, in Mumbai. The police investigation showed that the SUV belonged to Hiran but had been parked there by Vaze.

Former Maharashtra DGP (director general of police) Pravin Dixit suggests that the job of the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) is not yet over in the Deshmukh case. "The allegations, whether based on hearsay or otherwise, need to be backed by other evidence," says Dixit. "It's for the investigation agencies to present the evidence before the judicial officers."

The BJP's Devendra Fadnavis, who is leader of the opposition in the Maharashtra assembly, claims Singh's affidavit will have no bearing on the Deshmukh case as the FIR is based on a petition filed by a lawyer, Jayshree Patil, and not Singh. "Deshmukh was arrested by the Enforcement Directorate (ED) after he failed to establish the source of a certain amount received by his educational institute in Nagpur. The ED case has nothing to do with Param Bir Singh," says Fadnavis.

RISE AND FALL

Param Bir Singh has seen many ups and downs in his career spanning more than three decades

HIGHS

- As Maharashtra ATS joint commissioner, Singh arrested and interrogated Sadhvi Pragya Singh Thakur and Lt Col. Prasad S. Purohit in connection with the Malegaon bomb blasts in 2008
- As Thane police chief, he busted an international fake call centre and drugs syndicate in 2016-17

LOWS

- Singh, while he was Mumbai police chief, failed to act against Sachin Vaze in February 2021 for his suspicious role in the car bomb plant near industrialist Mukesh Ambani's home
- Posted as DG of Maharashtra Home Guard in March 2021, Singh disappeared for 231 days without informing his seniors
- Two real estate developers, Bimal Agarwal and Ketan Tanna, filed complaints of extortion against him in 2021, three years after the alleged incidents

Can Param Bir bounce back?

While Singh has extended an olive branch, the Thackeray government appears to be in no mood to relent. Thackeray, on November 29, took the first step towards initiating a departmental inquiry against Singh on the basis of a report filed by additional chief secretary (planning) Debashish Chakraborty in October. The report held Singh guilty of violating service rules while discharging his duties as Mumbai police commissioner. Chakraborty has reportedly cited Singh's March letter to the chief minister as an example of the violations.

Maharashtra home minister Dilip Walse-Patil says acting Maharashtra DGP Sanjay Pandey has recommended Singh's suspension from the post of DG, Home Guard, for his long absence from duty without informing seniors. "We have not yet accepted the recommendation," says Patil.

Singh was one of Maharashtra's most celebrated police officers until his career took a downturn in March this year. He was appointed Mumbai police chief in March 2020 against the wishes of Uddhav Thackeray. However, Singh is thought to have won the chief minister's heart by successfully dousing the fire against his son Aaditya Thackeray in the Sushant Singh Rajput death case. The bonhomie, though, did not last. With investigation into the extortion cases likely to gather pace, a sword hangs over Singh's future. Can he survive the investigation heat and revive his career? The picture will get clearer after December 6 when court protection against his arrest ends. ■

VEDA NILAYAM

IN AMMA'S NAME

By Amarnath K. Menon

The Madras High Court has nixed the AIADMK (All India Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam) plan to convert former chief minister J. Jayalalithaa's sprawling home into a second public memorial. In a November 24 verdict, Justice N. Seshasayee ruled against the decision of the former AIADMK government to acquire the property and directed the Chennai district collector to hand over the keys of the house to its legal heirs, J. Deepak and J. Deepa, nephew and niece of the former chief minister, within three weeks. For four decades, Jayalalithaa had lived in the bungalow 'Veda Nilayam' (named after her mother Vedavalli), on a property they had bought in 1967 in her superstar years in the upscale Poes Garden area of Chennai. After she died on December 5, 2016, and the other principal occupant, V.K. Sasikala, Jayalalalithaa's companion and caregiver, went to jail in February 2017, the Tamil Nadu government of then chief minister E.K. Palaniswami (EPS) took control of the property.

In the absence of a will, the EPS government had dismissed the claims of Deepak and Deepa as rightful heirs to the property. The brother-sister duo then moved court to stake their claim and challenge the state's acquisition. On May 22, 2020, the TN government issued an ordinance to take over the property after a quick inventory of its contents. In September, via enabling legislation, they created the Puratchi Thalaivi Dr J. Jayalalithaa Memorial Foundation for future upkeep and management of the property. All this, even as the AIADMK government readied a majestic memorial (cost: Rs 79.75 crore) on Chennai's Marina Beach where she was interred.

Shaped as an extension of the wings of the mythological Phoenix, it is intended, at least notionally, to overshadow the mausoleums of the earlier Dravidian chief ministers C.N. Annadurai, M.G. Ramachandran (MGR) and M. Karunanidhi, whose remains are also interred in the area.

In his judgment, Judge Seshasayee observed that today's India is not a land of pharaohs or emperors to erect monuments to immortalise the dead. "The India of today is not the Raj of yesteryears where administrators can bask in a fallacy that the wealth of the state is the wealth of the ruler. No, it is the wealth of the ruled...the people," wrote the judge. Meanwhile, apparently unmindful of the judgment, the DMK government is preparing to erect a Rs 39 crore memorial to Karunanidhi on Marina Beach, again at public expense. ■

₹100 CRORE

Estimated value of the late Jayalalithaa's house, 'Veda Nilayam', at the iconic address, 81, Poes Garden, in Chennai. She had bought the **24,000 sq. ft** property with her mother Vedavalli in 1967 for **Rs 1.32 lakh**

₹37.5 CRORE

Tax arrears owed by Jayalalithaa, which now passes on to the estate

ANI

ANI

FARE THEE WELL

1. AIADMK supporters at Veda Nilayam for the dedication of the house as her second memorial

2. AIADMK leader and then chief minister EPS offers tributes to Jayalalithaa at Veda Nilayam

3. A regular event when she was alive, 'Amma' waving to supporters from the first floor balcony of Veda Nilayam

ANI

AP

THE RICHES INSIDE

32,721
Items inventoried by government authorities under 26 heads after Jaya's death, including...

4.37 kg
Gold in 14 items

601.4 kg
Silver in 867 items

556
Items of furniture

8,376
Books

Jayalalithaa Memorial
Spread over **50,000 sq. ft** at the Memorial Complex on Marina Beach, it cost the exchequer **Rs 79.75 crore**. Then chief minister EPS had planned to unveil it on Feb. 24, 2021, her birth anniversary, but apprehensive that an out-of-jail Sasikala might upstage him, the opening date was advanced to Jan. 27

MARINA BEACH MEMORIALS

Anna Memorial The memorial to C.N. Annadurai, the first chief minister of Tamil Nadu, was built in 1969. It has had three makeovers—the last one, in 2012, cost Rs 1.2 crore

MGR Memorial Built in 1988; this one too has seen many makeovers, the last in 2012 at a cost of Rs 4.3 crore

Karunanidhi Memorial It comes up adjacent to the three existing memorials on 2.21 acres at a cost of Rs 39 crore. To be unveiled in 2022

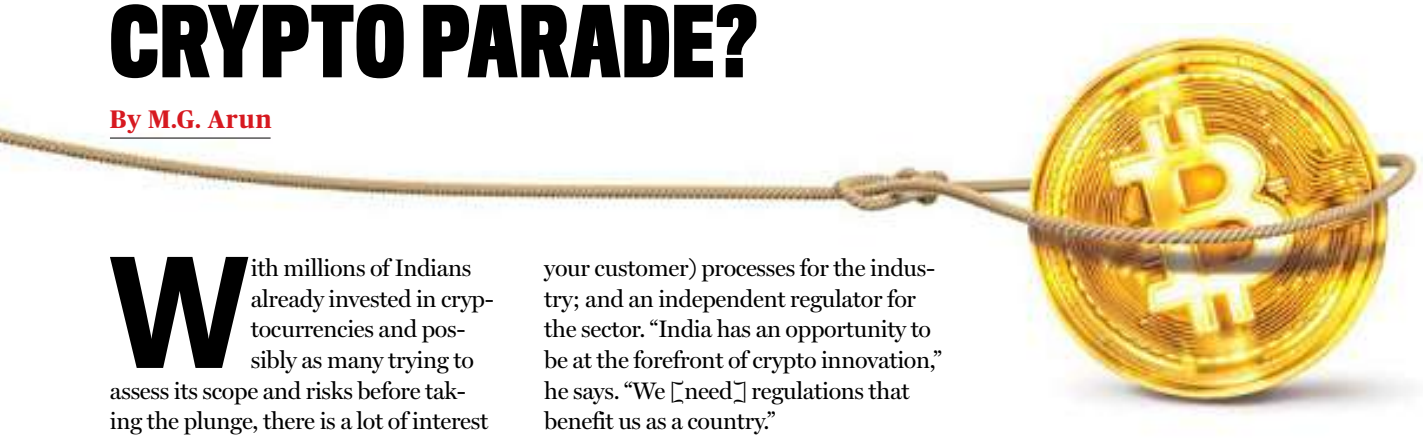
HEIRS TO THE FORTUNE

Jayalalithaa's elder brother J. Jayakumar and his family moved out of Veda Nilayam in 1978. His children, **Deepa, 47**, and **Deepak, 40**, are the legal heirs to Jayalalithaa's fortune. Deepa did make an attempt to claim Jayalalithaa's political legacy with her MGR Amma Deepa Peravai in 2017, but it sank without a ripple. Deepak keeps a low profile and is in the real estate business

CRYPTOCURRENCY BILL

RAINING ON INDIA'S CRYPTO PARADE?

By M.G. Arun



With millions of Indians already invested in cryptocurrencies and possibly as many trying to assess its scope and risks before taking the plunge, there is a lot of interest in the upcoming Cryptocurrency and Regulation of Official Digital Currency Bill, 2021, slated for discussion in the ongoing winter session of Parliament. The Bill is expected to include accountability and transparency standards for crypto-trading exchanges, with many hoping the digital tokens will be treated as assets like equities or real estate.

It's near-certain that private cryptocurrencies, like Bitcoin or Ethereum, will not be recognised as legal tender in India. On November 29, Union finance minister Nirmala Sitharaman told the Lok Sabha that the Centre had no plans to recognise Bitcoin—the largest cryptocurrency by value—as a currency. Government sources say there are likely to be regulations against "misleading, over-promising and non-transparent" advertising in the sector, with measures to prevent cryptocurrencies from becoming "avenues for money laundering and terror financing", as spokespersons for the government said following a meeting on the subject chaired by PM Narendra Modi in mid-November.

Industry members want cryptos to be recognised as an investment avenue. Ashish Singhal, founder and CEO of crypto exchange CoinSwitch, is hopeful that the regulations will focus on four areas: the classification of cryptos as a regulated asset class; a clear framework for the movement of funds to and from digital tokens; rigorous KYC (know your customer) processes for the industry; and an independent regulator for the sector. "India has an opportunity to be at the forefront of crypto innovation," he says. "We [need] regulations that benefit us as a country."

Former finance secretary Subhash Chandra Garg describes the cryptocurrency ecosystem as an 'alternative digital economy' that rests on blockchain-cryptography technology, in contrast with the centralised database technology underpinning the existing digital economy. He identifies three major components: Real goods and services (including music services, digital applications and decentralised financing services); digital assets (like NFTs, or non-fungible tokens); and the use of cryptos as currency. "The [government] needs to come up with policies for all the three facets," he says.

India could draw from global examples, where regulations are in place to protect investors but still encourage investments in the underlying technology. In the US, each state has its own laws to regulate cryptocurrencies. Some exempt cryptocurrencies from state securities laws and money transmission statutes—in 2018, Ohio became the first state in that country to accept tax payments in Bitcoin, a decision that was later revoked. Other states, like Maryland and Hawaii, have issued warnings about investing in cryptos. In the UK, crypto exchanges need to register with the Financial Conduct Authority, which regulates financial firms and markets. Consumers can buy and sell cryptocurrencies, but they are not classified as legal tender and the trading of cryptocurrency derivatives is banned. In the European Union, draft legislation—the Markets in Crypto-Assets Regulation framework, which treats cryptocurrencies as financial instruments—was released in September 2020, but is yet to be ratified. In contrast, earlier this year, China imposed a blanket ban on all private cryptocurrency transactions, which some say is to prevent competition to its highly regulated digital Yuan. While the views on regulations differ, the consensus seems to be that there is a need for better safeguards to protect investors. ■

$6 billion
(~Rs 45,000 crore)
The amount Indians have invested in cryptos

$2.65 trillion
(~Rs 198 lakh crore)
Global crypto market cap, as on Dec. 1, 2021

$2.3 billion
(~Rs 17,250 crore)
Expected size of the global crypto business by 2026, from the current $1.6 billion (~Rs 12,000 crore)

230
The number of crypto start-ups operating in India

Sources: Nasscom, coinmarketcap.com

Illustration by NILANJAN DAS

POWERS THAT BE
CM Chouhan with chief secretary Iqbal Singh Bains and DGP Vivek Johri

IAS VS IPS

THIS ROUND TO THE MEN IN KHAKI

By Rahul Noronha

After 'considering it' for years, the Madhya Pradesh chief minister Shivraj Singh Chouhan, on November 21, announced that his government will introduce the police commissioner system in the state. The system essentially involves transfer of magisterial functions from the district magistrate and the executive magistracy under him/her to police officers. The IAS (Indian Administrative Service) lobby, which had successfully thwarted two previous attempts at this change—in 2012 and 2018—has finally relented, it appears. Chouhan says initially state capital Bhopal and commercial capital Indore will get police commissioners.

So why did the chief minister decide to bring in the police commissioner system even when there was no clamour for it nor a pressing law and order problem that merited such a response? Sources says the nudge came from Prime Minister Narendra Modi who, while addressing IPS probationers at the SVP National Police Academy in Hyderabad earlier this year, had said that states that hadn't yet implemented the system, should consider doing so in cities with a million-plus population.

Fully aware that there would be resistance from the IAS lobby, Chouhan took pains to ensure the transfer of power did not devolve into a full-blown territorial dispute. On November 22, the state's home department began working on the notification for the appointments and got it vetted by the law department. In the days to follow, a trench war-like scenario prevailed between the IAS and IPS lobbies while working out what powers would be transferred to the newly appointed commissioners. The IAS mandarins at the home department apparently drove a hard bargain, and so the new police commissioners in MP will still not have powers to issue arms licences (vested with their counterparts in other metros) nor get powers to attach property but would get jurisdiction on other sections of the CrPC, such as Section 151 that deals with preventive detention, the Arms Act, the UAPA or Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act, the NSA or National Security Act and the Motor Vehicles Act.

The IAS lobby, which has been thwarting MP's plans to switch to a police commissioner system, was served a fait accompli by the CM

In many ways, the police commissioners in MP will be weaker than their counterparts elsewhere. They are, however, hopeful that in days to come, the government will transfer more functions to commissioners. "It is only a matter of time. Once the commissioners are in place, more functions will be transferred by the government," says a senior IPS officer.

Staffing of the commissionerates is another issue. The proposed structure includes a commissioner of police (CP)

of the rank of additional director general/ inspector general (ADG/ IG), with two additional CPs (DIG rank or below) and four DCPs (deputy commissioners of police). The two police districts currently in existence in Bhopal and Indore will be subdivided into four, each under the charge of a DCP. The proposed staffing structure makes the IAS feel superior as a member of the service will continue to have greater jurisdiction than the police commissioner, who will be many years his senior.

The IAS Association, however, refused to comment on the development, with its president I.C.P. Keshari maintaining that he "would not like to reduce the issue to a dispute between the IAS and IPS". The associations representing the executive magistracy, the SDMs from the provincial civil service and the tehsildars were more vocal and made a representation to Chief Minister Chouhan opposing the move.

Does the existence of a police commissioner affect the citizenry in any way? Police commissionerates were introduced in India by the British—in Chennai and Kolkata in 1856 and in Mumbai in 1864. There are currently 69 police commissionerates in India; 12 of 28 states and seven of eight Union Territories do not have the commissionerate system (*see graphic*).

The rationale extended in favour of the PC system is that it provides a 'single window' system on law and order issues. In a district administration, the DM and SP are both involved in maintaining law and order. While the SP heads the team that investigates crime, the DM and other revenue officials function as magistrates. In a metro, with the revenue officials involved in other functions, a police commissioner system reduces the reaction time in a law and order situation since both executive and magisterial functions are vested in the police officers above a certain rank.

"There should not be duality in power and responsibility. Maintenance of law and order is the responsibility of the police and the power to do so should come with it. In places where the police commissioner system has not been introduced, the police 'deals with the situation', while it is 'decided' by the magistrates. There is often a difference in perception, which creates a problem. When something goes wrong, invariably it is the police that gets blamed," says Prakash Singh former DG, BSF and Uttar Pradesh. He also refutes the argument often proffered by people in the IAS that the commissionerate system bypasses necessary restraints on police powers. "There are multiple levels of checks and balances. In cities where the commissioner system exists, it is not as if the police has gone out of control. The force must be trusted," he added. Singh said the IAS opposition was in effect "resistance to their *zamindari* being taken away". ■

STATES AND UTs THAT DO NOT HAVE A POLICE COMMISSIONER SYSTEM

12 of 28
states, including Bihar, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh, Uttarakhand, Himachal Pradesh, Manipur, Sikkim, Arunachal Pradesh, Mizoram,Tripura, Nagaland, Goa

7 of 8
UTs, including Jammu, Kashmir, Ladakh, Andaman & Nicobar, Lakshadweep, Daman & Diu, Puducherry and Chandigarh; **Delhi** is the lone exception

VIDUSHI MARDA

GUEST COLUMN

THE STATE'S DATA OVERREACH

On November 22, the Joint Parliamentary Committee (JPC) constituted to review the Personal Data Protection Bill, 2019, finalised its report after two years of deliberation. The Bill is expected to be tabled in Parliament in the ongoing 2021 winter session.

A prominent aspect emerging from media reports is the JPC's decision to retain controversial provisions of the 2019 Act that give the State wide powers in the context of collecting and processing personal data. More specifically, reports suggest that the JPC recommends only minor tweaks to Section 35 of the Bill, which allows the central government to exempt its agencies from complying with the Act if it is convinced that such exemption is "necessary or expedient" in the interest of national security, or more specifically "sovereignty and integrity of India, security of the State, friendly relations with other States or public order".

These provisions give rise to a host of issues. First, the threshold for exemptions to be assessed as 'expedient', a term with no precise legal definition, provides potential carte blanche to the central government to unilaterally exempt agencies from complying with the Bill, especially in the absence of any accountability or oversight mechanisms. Terms like 'sovereignty and integrity of India', 'security of the State' and 'public order' are wide enough to be all-encompassing and imprecise, effectively diluting any check on such exemption. Reports indicate that the minor change indicated by the JPC is for the exemption process to be 'just, fair, reasonable and proportionate'. While this is (at best) a step in the right direction, it means little in the absence of accountability mechanisms, on which account the JPC is deafeningly silent. The Committee instead retains the current language of the Bill, which delegates the contours of these procedures, safeguards and oversight mechanisms to rules 'as may be prescribed'.

Similarly, the JPC keeps Section 12 of the 2019 Bill intact, which provides for non-consensual processing of personal data by the State, if such processing is necessary to provide a service or benefit, or engage in functions of the State. Given the myriad ways in which the State processes the personal data of citizens, and also keeping in mind the large ambit of the term 'State', it is hard to legally justify the JPC's conclusion. As in the case of Sec. 35, here too an overarching exemption is dangerous without a proportionality requirement and given ample evidence of data breach in government agencies.

At the time of writing this piece, at least five dissent notes had been filed against the Report by members of the JPC, airing concerns about the lack of oversight and the sweeping exceptions the Act grants the State, which are unlikely to stand the test of constitutionality in a court of law.

At the heart of these recommendations is a fundamental misconception: that balancing privacy and security means rejecting one in favour of the other. But it's not a zero-sum game: the insistence on balancing privacy and security simply necessitates careful oversight and regulation. Privacy is a fundamental right in India as laid down by the Supreme Court in 2017. However, it is by no means an absolute right. Any infringement of this right must pass the proportionality test laid down by the Supreme Court, under which the infringing action must be shown to be: i) imposed by law, ii) in pursuit of a legitimate aim, iii) necessary and balanced, i.e. must be the least restrictive way to achieve the aim, and iv) have sufficient procedural guarantees.

The fundamental misconception at the heart of the JPC report is that balancing privacy and security means rejecting one in favour of the other

As time progresses, a systematic dilution of these safeguards is becoming increasingly apparent. The 2018 version of the Data Protection Bill, instance, included these tests within Sec. 35 of the Bill. But the 2019 version seems to have taken several steps back by rejecting carefully laid out legal standards and safeguards. In recent months, the need for stronger protections against State surveillance and exercises of power vis-a-vis individual rights was emphasised in the Pegasus case, and indications of the JPC's recommendations seem to continue to paint a grim picture. Even though the Pegasus case was celebrated for rejecting blanket claims of national security to violate individual rights, it still revealed an overarching issue we see replicated through the JPC's report—the mechanisms and oversight needed to hold the Executive to account require an urgent and sharp rehaul. ■

Vidushi Marda *is a Bengaluru-based lawyer and researcher. She currently leads global research and engagement at ARTICLE 19, an international human rights organisation*

Illustration by SIDDHANT JUMDE

FROM AATMANIRBHAR GUJARAT TO AATMANIRBHAR BHARAT

The Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit (VGGS 2022) is back again! After the delay caused by the COVID-19 pandemic last year, India's foremost and most anticipated investment and trade summit returns with all its vigour and vibrancy.

Gujarat has built a reputation as the most business-friendly state in the country. What sets it apart is its people and their entrepreneurial spirit. No wonder it has become the most preferred investment destination across the globe.

Conceptualised under the visionary leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Shri Narendra Modi (the then Hon'ble Chief Minister of Gujarat) in 2003, VGGS is a biennial summit.

Since its beginning, it has been one of the most sought-after summits for business networking, knowledge sharing, and strategic partnerships. It established Gujarat as an investment-friendly destination and made it a global business powerhouse. Each year, the event has made massive strides with enhanced global participation bringing in sustainable and inclusive economic development.

> "A progressive state, Gujarat has always been at the forefront of development. The vibrant spirit of the land is truly embedded in the Vibrant Gujarat Summits. I invite the world to come and partner with the 10th Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit and discover the investment opportunities."
>
> **Shri Narendra Modi**
> Hon'ble PM, India

The 9th Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit was held in January 2019 with the theme 'Shaping A New India'. The event saw the participation of more than 42,000 delegates from 135 countries, including Heads of State and Prime Ministers from 5 countries; 20 ministerial delegations, global CEOs, representatives from multinational organisations, and thought leaders. Gujarat played an instrumental role in connecting India to the world across multiple sectors through this summit.

The 10th Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit to be held from January 10-12, 2022, celebrates the spirit of 75 years of Indian Independence and how far the nation and the state of Gujarat have progressed. As the country gears up for the Hon'ble Prime Minister's clarion call of self-reliance in all major spheres, the summit imbibes it in the theme, 'From Aatmanirbhar Gujarat to Aatmanirbhar Bharat'. This year focuses on key national initiatives and

Dholera SIR: A greenfield industrial city with worldclass infrastructure.

"Gujarat has always been the hub of growth and development. 'Aatmanirbhar Gujarat to Aatmanirbhar Bharat' strengthens our commitment towards the same."

Shri Bhupendra Patel
Hon'ble CM, Gujarat

emerging global themes like sustainable industrial infrastructure and manufacturing, green hydrogen, renewable energy, electric mobility, technology and innovation.

Hon'ble Prime Minister, Shri Narendra Modi has said that a new India is emerging which will be modern and competitive, yet caring and compassionate. Gujarat has shown it is committed to realising the Prime Minister's vision of an Aatmanirbhar Bharat. Under his guidance, the state has been moving towards its goal of Aatmanirbhar Gujarat with focus on sectors like agro and food processing, aerospace and defence, renewable energy, automobiles including EVs, pharmaceuticals, and chemicals & petrochemicals.

The series of events for Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit will begin with a curtain-raiser led by the Hon'ble Chief Minister of Gujarat. There will also be national and international roadshows led by various ministers and other departments.

The pre-summit events will be from December 1, 2021 to January 9, 2022. It will showcase sector-specific business opportunities available in Gujarat.

The main event will begin with an inaugural ceremony on January 10, 2022. Other flagship events include

The Pre-Summit Events are;

- ENGIMACH Tradeshow
- Agro & Food Processing: Entering a new era of cooperation
- Local Goes Global: Export-led growth
- Signature Sparkle 2021: Gems & Jewellery retail exhibition
- Weaving Growth for Textiles
- International Conference of Academic Institutions
- Holistic Healthcare: Good health and well-being for all
- DHOLERA: Smart city to smart businesses
- Startups: Inspiring disruptive innovations

Mundra Port- India's largest commercial port

Azadi@75, which lays emphasis on the PM GatiShakti National Master Plan, and the Production Linked Incentive – Towards Aatmanirbhar Bharat, among others. This will be followed by country and state-specific seminars and high-level B2B meetings in the next few days. The Vibrant Gujarat Global Summit 2022 will also include the iconic Global Trade Show with the theme 'Towards A Sustainable & Aatmanirbahar Bharat'.

Over the years, VGGS has emerged as one of the greatest growth-driven success stories. It is a testimony to the long-term vision and leadership of Hon'ble Prime Minister Narendra Modi. In the wake of COVID-19, the event has been organised keeping safety and COVID protocols in mind. Save the dates from January 10 to 12, 2022, to witness a mega event where world leaders from government and business come together to share contemporary challenges and chart a path for global sustainable development.

GIFT City-A Global Financial & IT Hub

COVER STORY

BJP

MISSION 2022

THE BJP HIGH COMMAND HONES ITS ELECTORAL STRATEGY FOR KEY POLLS IN UTTAR PRADESH AND OTHER STATES TO OVERCOME ANTI-INCUMBENCY AND THE HEALTH AND ECONOMIC CHALLENGES RESULTING FROM THE PANDEMIC

BY ANILESH S. MAHAJAN

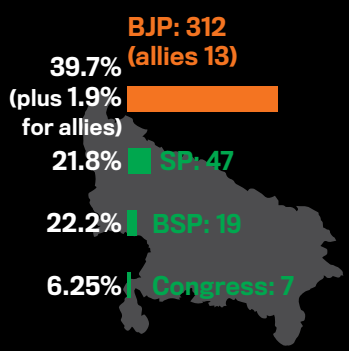
PTI

ONE FOR ALL...
BJP leaders felicitating Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the party national executive in Delhi, Nov. 7

ON THE FRONTLINES

PARTY STRATEGIES AND THE CORE TEAMS FOR THE SEVEN ASSEMBLY POLLS TO BE HELD IN 2022

Total seats: 403



UTTAR PRADESH

Key BJP strategies

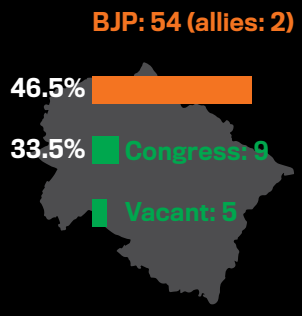
- Stitched alliances with caste-based groups
- Micro-managing state by dividing into six zones
- Leveraging Modi's soft Hindutva and hard Hindutva of Yogi Adityanath
- Poll planks: better law & order, development, relatively corruption-free regime, pro-poor policies
- Free vaccination and new vaccine campaign 'Har Ghar Dastak' (party is trying to make vaccination a poll issue)
- Ram Mandir in Ayodhya, abrogation of Art. 370, return of Ma Annapurna's stolen idol, redevelopment of Kashi planks to pep up Hindu sentiment

Team BJP

Organisation: State in-charge: Radha Mohan Singh
Organisational affairs in-charge: Sanjay Bhatia (western UP), Sanjeev Chaurasia (Braj), Y. Satya Kumar (Awadh), Sudhir Gupta (Kanpur), Arvind Menon (Gorakhpur), Sunil Oza (Kashi)

Election management:
In-charge: Dharmendra Pradhan.
Co-in-charge: Capt. Abhimanyu (western UP), Arjun Ram Meghwal, Vivek Thakur (Braj), Saroj Pande (Awadh), Shobha Karandlaje (Kanpur), Anurag Thakur (Gorakhpur), Annapoorna Devi (Kashi)

Total seats: 70



UTTARAKHAND

Key BJP strategies

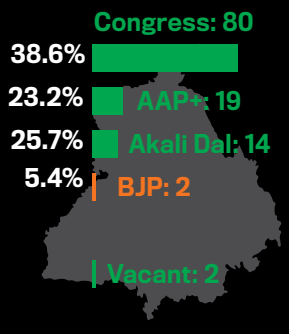
- PM Modi's brand of Hindutva plus development
- Uttarakhand CM's age and appeal to youth
- Double engines–BJP at the Centre and state–to accelerate economic growth
- Speedy free vaccination in the state. Projected to help revival of economy

Team BJP

Organisation: Vice-president supervision: Saudan Singh
In-charge: Dushyant Gautam

Election management:
In-charge: Prahlad Patel
Co-in-charge: Locket Chatterjee, R.P. Singh

Total seats: 117



PUNJAB

Key BJP strategies

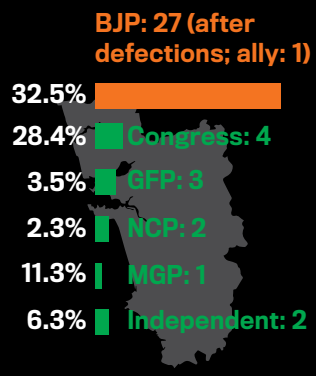
- Early break-up with ally SAD has put BJP on the defensive
- Banking heavily on nationalism and anti-Jat Sikh sentiment in the state
- Repealed farm laws & slashing of taxes on petroleum products could help attract Hindu voters
- An alliance with Amarinder Singh's Punjab Lok Congress & Sukhdev Singh Dhindsa's SAD (Democratic) may open new avenues

Team BJP:

Organisation: Vice-president supervision: Saudan Singh
In-charge: Dushyant Gautam
Co-in-charge: Dr Narinder Singh Raina

Election management:
In-charge: Gajendra Shekhawat
Co-in-charge: Hardeep Singh Puri, Meenakshi Lekhi, Vinodbhai Chavda

Total seats: 40



GOA

Key BJP strategies:

- Banking on split in opposition votes to cut anti-incumbency of 10 years
- Alliance with MGP will strengthen Hindu voter base
- Hindutva plus development

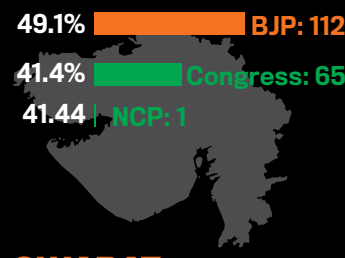
Team BJP

Organisation:
Supervision: Shiv Prakash
In-charge: C.T. Ravi

Election management:
In-charge: Devendra Fadnavis
Co-in-charge: G. Krishna Reddy, Darshana Jardosh

■ TOTAL SEATS
■ SEATS WON BY THE BJP
■ VOTE SHARE PERCENTAGE
■ OTHER PARTIES
*Seat numbers reflect current party position in the assembly

Total seats: 182



GUJARAT

Key BJP strategies

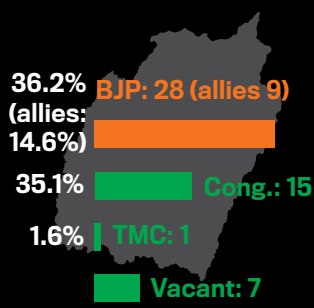
- PM Modi's presence at the Centre
- Hindutva + development
- Patels now in power (CM + central ministers)
- Neutralised anti-incumbency sentiment by changing CM

Team BJP

Organisation:
In charge: Bhupender Yadav# (may be relieved of the responsibility)
Co-incharge: Sudhir Gupta

Election management:
Team hasn't been announced yet

Total seats: 60



MANIPUR

Key BJP strategies

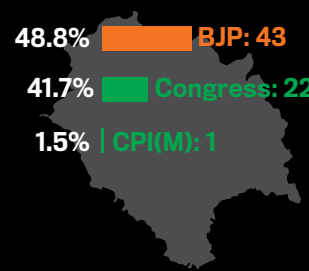
- Nationalism and the fact that the BJP is solidly placed at the Centre
- Moving cautiously on issues related to Hills vs Valley
- Cash in on opposition disarray

Team BJP

Organisation:
Supervision: Dilip Saikia
In-charge: Sambit Patra

Election management:
In-charge: Bhupender Yadav
Co-in-charge: Pratima Bhoumik, Ashok Singhal

Total seats: 68



HIMACHAL PRADESH

Key BJP strategies

- PM Modi's pro-Hindutva and pro-development image
- Relatively corruption-free administration
- Relatively good execution of social sector schemes

Organisation

Supervision: Saudan Singh
In-charge: Avinash Rai Khanna
Co-in-charge: Sanjay Tandon

Election management:
Team hasn't been announced yet

Graphics by RAJ VERMA

Trust Amit Shah to know just how important the states going to the assembly elections, particularly Uttar Pradesh, in February 2022, will be for the national fortunes of the ruling Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP). Last month, while addressing a gathering of over 700 party workers in Varanasi, the Union home minister and former party president told them: "The foundation of the 2024 Lok Sabha election, which will be held under the leadership of Narendra Modiji, will be laid in the 2022 assembly election in UP."

For the BJP, the seven assembly elections scheduled in 2022—UP, Uttarakhand, Punjab, Manipur, Goa (which go to the polls in February), and Gujarat and Himachal Pradesh (in late 2022)—will indeed be a significant battle in the run-up to the 2024 general election, determining whether the party will rule for a third consecutive term. These states contribute 132, or 24 per cent, of the 543 seats in the Lok Sabha, with UP alone contributing 80 seats. Barring Punjab, the BJP is in power in the six other states where elections are due next year. The next round of assembly elections, therefore, will be a verdict not just on the ruling party's handling of the Covid-19 pandemic that has had a devastating economic, social and health impact both at the central and state level but also have a major bearing on its prospects in the general election two years later.

Before 2024, though, the BJP has more immediate concerns to address. Elections to 74 of the 245 Rajya Sabha seats will be held between March and June 2022. Eleven of these will come from UP, five from Punjab and one from Uttarakhand. Of these 17 seats, the BJP has six MPs retiring from the upper house next year. The party currently has 93 of the 245 seats

in the upper house and the number of seats the BJP wins in the upcoming assembly polls in February will determine whether it will have a full majority of 123 seats before the general election.

Come July, the country will also elect a new President, where 4,120 members of legislative assemblies and 776 members of Parliament will form the Electoral College. Of these, 590 legislators—a majority from the BJP—are seeking re-election in the forthcoming assembly polls. These five states will collectively have a value of 103,756, or approximately 10 per cent, votes for the presidential elections. Of this 10 per cent, 80 per cent, or 83,824 votes, will come from UP alone. The combination of these factors has made BJP's Mission 2022 critical, and the party's leaving no stone unturned to come up trumps.

THE CHALLENGES AHEAD

Of the 28 states in the country, the BJP remains dominant in most, a privilege only the Congress enjoyed once. Currently, the saffron party rules 12 states directly and is part of the ruling coalition in six others. This does put it in pole position for the next round of assembly elections save the battering its invincible image took when it threw all it had into the West Bengal assembly election in April only to be routed overwhelmingly by Mamata Banerjee. Likewise, the BJP's southern ambitions were thwarted when the CPI(M) returned to power in Kerala and M.K. Stalin's DMK trounced BJP ally AIADMK to storm to power in Tamil Nadu. The small consolations were the decisive win in Assam and a government in Puducherry with ally N.R. Congress. The BJP has also emerged as the major Opposition party in West Bengal, with a vote percentage of 38.1 per cent to the TMC's 47.9 per cent, obliterating the Left and Congress.

Yet, ever since its decisive majority (303 for BJP, 353 for NDA) in the 2019 general election, the party has struggled to repeat its performance in subsequent assembly elections. In Bihar, despite an excellent strike rate of 67 per cent (winning 72 of the 110 seats it contested), its ally Janata Dal (United) fared badly and the coalition huffed and puffed across the finish line, with the Lalu Yadav-less Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) putting up a spirited fight. In Delhi, despite a high-decibel and polarising campaign, it could not unseat Arvind Kejriwal's Aam Aadmi Party.

In addition, the BJP is acutely aware that its handling of the devastating second wave of the Covid-19 pandemic has seriously dented its image, at the Centre as well as in the states it rules. Nor is the Indian economy, despite encouraging reports of respectable GDP growth, including in the recent quarter, out of the doldrums yet, with both the lack of jobs and inflation emerging as major concerns. Moreover, in each of these six states, the BJP must combat anti-incumbency, factionalism, the exodus of allies and the inability of the local leadership to keep the house in order. In the past year, therefore, the BJP has pushed all the buttons at its command and worked on a game plan that it hopes will put it streets ahead of the Opposition.

The Modi government, for example, in November announced that it will reduce the central excise duty on petrol by Rs 5 and on diesel by Rs 10 (followed by BJP-ruled states reducing VAT). Then, on November 19, the prime minister, after prolonged intransigence, announced the repealing of the farm laws his government had rammed through in Parliament in September 2020. Both moves are clearly meant to blunt the Opposition's criticism of inflation and the government's apparent insensitivity towards agitating farmers, which would have had an impact in the UP and Punjab polls.

Besides, despite the setbacks in the West Bengal poll and the fallout of Covid's second wave, Brand Modi remains indispensable to the party's political fortunes. India Today's Mood of the Nation Poll in August 2021 showed that Modi's personal popularity ratings remain significantly high despite a drop over past years. Party leaders also believe that the accelerated vaccination across the country is reinforcing PM Modi's image of being a doer. "He is our best bet," says a top BJP leader. "As a firm believer of the original Indian nationalism—Swaraj (self-rule), Swadeshi (indigenous) and Swavalamban (self-reliance)—we are just trying to take things efficiently to people."

The BJP is also combining Brand Modi's appeal with a massive outreach to the common man, invoking *sammaan* (respect), *bhagidari* (representation) and *rashtravaad* (nationalism). It is urging its cadre to build what the prime minister in a recent national executive of the party called an *aastha ka pul* (bridge of faith) to the common man with *seva*, *sankalp* and *samarpan* (service, determination and dedication).

REVAMPING THE LEADERSHIP

The BJP has also made changes at the state party level in recent months. In the past seven years, the party, first under Shah and then under Nadda, has become a formidable electoral army, never resting on its laurels and learn-

THE BJP'S ELECTION MACHINE

Using technology, the BJP has activised its grass-root level workers across the country and corporatised its election machinery, even introducing KRAs for state leaders

- The party's database of 180 million volunteers has been classified by profession, area and interests using digital software. They were then activated for party work at the grassroots level. WhatsApp groups were created at the booth level to impart information in the form of videos, documents, voice-modulated messages etc.
- Regular training camps are organised at the mandal level about how to propagate the news of PM Modi's programmes and policies to the specific groups they belong to
- All officebearers of the party, including state unit chiefs, have key result areas (KRAs) expected of them and their performance is monitored
- A battalion of 8,000 full-time party workers have been deputed as *poornkalik vistaraks* (full-time expansionists) across all the Vidhan Sabha constituencies in the country to ensure implementation of party programmes at the assembly level; 800 vistaraks deployed in UP alone
- Upgrading the *panna pramukh* to *panna samitis*–five-member committees at all 1.04 million polling booths across the country with the priority being the five states going to the polls. Each *panna pramukh* will contact 30 voters or 5-6 families on one page of an electoral roll and fill them in on the party agenda
- All nine BJP general secretaries have to undertake *chakri pravas* (tours by rotation) of the states they are in charge of and ensure smooth functioning of party affairs
- Massive outreach plans launched including the *jan ashirvad* yatras of newly inducted ministers, Azaadi ka Amrit Mahotsav to mark the completion of PM's 20 years in public office, the *seva hi sanghathan* campaign involving its newly organised cadre of 1 million healthcare volunteers and the *har ghar dastak* plan to persuade people to get fully vaccinated against Covid
- All seven morchas–Yuva Morcha, Mahila Morcha, SC Morcha, ST Morcha, Minority Morcha, OBC Morcha and Kisan Morcha–have been asked to organise teams at the mandal level. Separate research, training, workshops, *sammelan* and communication strategies are being evolved for them

THE SEVEN STATES GOING TO ELECTIONS NEXT YEAR CONSTITUTE 132, OR 24 PER CENT, OF THE 543 SEATS IN THE LOK SABHA, WITH UTTAR PRADESH ALONE CONTRIBUTING A SUBSTANTIAL 80 SEATS

ing from its failures. Through a series of recent actions, including a cabinet reshuffle at the Centre, replacement of chief ministers in the states, appointment of new state office-bearers, the Modi-Shah-Nadda troika has made the party line clear: it is looking for younger, savvier leadership, besides making it more inclusive and equitable, with a focus on women, OBCs, Dalits and tribal people. To enable this, the party has replaced state leaders with ruthless urgency.

In Uttarakhand, for instance, when the party found that Tirath Singh Rawat, who had replaced Trivendra Singh Rawat as chief minister in March, wasn't delivering, it sacked him in July. In his place, the party installed Pushkar Singh Dhami who, at 46 years of age, is the youngest in his own cabinet. The party is now expected to deny half its sitting legislators tickets and get fresh faces instead. Likewise, in Gujarat, sensing the growing anti-incumbency against Vijay Rupani, the BJP high command changed the entire state leadership in September. A political greenhorn, 59-year-old Bhupendrabhai Patel was sworn in as the new Gujarat chief minister and several fresh faces introduced into the cabinet.

And while the chief ministers may have remained unchanged in other poll-bound states, moves are being made to induct new faces. Former Maharashtra chief minister and Goa BJP in-charge Devendra Fadnavis held meetings with senior BJP leaders and MLAs in October, telling them the party may replace many sitting legislators. In Manipur, too, the BJP is likely to dump many of its legislators to counter anti-incumbency. In Punjab, after splitting with the Shiromani Akali Dal in 2020, the BJP has in the past year concentrated on consolidating its support among urban Hindus and Dalit Sikhs. The Modi government's decision to repeal the farm laws is aimed at easing the anger of the dominant Jat Sikhs community. More recently, the BJP has been hobnobbing with former chief minister Amarinder Singh and his splinter group, the Punjab Lok Congress, in the hope of bringing moderate Sikhs into its fold. However, it still faces an uphill task in the state.

ENERGISING ITS POLL ARMY

Simultaneously, Nadda is enlisting key general secretaries, such as B.L. Santhosh, Arun Singh, Tarun Chugh, C.T. Ravi and Dilip Saikia, and vice-presidents such as Saudan Singh, Radha Mohan Singh, Baijayant Panda and D.K. Aruna to energise the cadres and fortify the organisation Shah built. The party used digital technology to sift through its database of 180 million volunteers, grouping them according to profession and booth location (See Nadda interview: *'The BJP is never complacent. We have taken all steps to win in 2022'*). It then created WhatsApp groups at booth levels and relayed information about the party's performance and agenda through videos, documents and voice-modulated messages. Regular training camps are being organised at the mandal level to ensure party workers are well informed about PM Modi's programmes and

THE WORLD'S LARGEST POLL ARMY

THE BJP BEHEMOTH IS BUILT ON DIFFERENT LEVELS OF LEADERSHIP. THESE ARE SOME OF THE LEADERS THAT HELP KEEP THE PARTY ON TOP IN INDIA'S POLITICAL ORDER

HIGH COMMAND

NARENDRA MODI, 71

BACKGROUND: *Prime Minisiter and former CM of Gujarat*

ROLE: Party's biggest brand, key campaigner

AMIT SHAH, 57

BACKGROUND: *Union home minister and former BJP president*

ROLE: Key strategist and campaigner, mentor

JAGAT PRAKASH NADDA, 61

BACKGROUND: *Ex-Union health minister, MP from Himachal and BJP president*

ROLE: The BJP CEO works in close coordination with Modi, Shah and RSS's Dattatreya Hosabale

VICE-PRESIDENTS

SAUDAN SINGH, 59

BACKGROUND: RSS *pracharak*, deputed to BJP

ROLE: Oversees party work in Punjab, Haryana, Himachal Pradesh and Uttarakhand and social organisations in party fold

RADHA MOHAN SINGH, 72

BACKGROUND: Former Union agriculture minister and MP from Bihar

ROLE: In charge of party affairs in poll-bound UP

BAIJAYANT PANDA, 57

BACKGROUND: Odisha politician, former BJD MP

ROLE: In charge of party affairs in Delhi and Assam. Consulted on business and economic affairs

GENERAL SECRETARIES

B.L. SANTHOSH, 54

BACKGROUND: RSS *pracharak* deputed to BJP from Karnataka

ROLE: All-powerful general secretary (organisation) drives tech-oriented programmes, coordinates with RSS

ARUN SINGH, 56

BACKGROUND: CA, Rajnath Singh's co-brother

ROLE: Gen. secy (HQ) is go-between for BJP brass, external stakeholders; finance in-charge

TARUN CHUGH, 51

BACKGROUND: Politician from Punjab

ROLE: Anchors Nadda's tours and all major party campaigns; in charge of J&K, Ladakh, Telangana and BJYM

C.T. RAVI, 54

BACKGROUND: Former MLA and minister in Karnataka

ROLE: In charge of party affairs in Goa, Maharashtra, TN; anchors organisational expansion in south

DILIP SAIKIA, 48

BACKGROUND: MP from Assam

ROLE: Works with Assam CM Himanta Biswa Sarma to expand party in the Northeast

VINOD TAWDE, 58

BACKGROUND: Ex-Maharashtra minister

ROLE: Elevated as GS after Bhupender Yadav was relieved. In charge of party affairs in Haryana, could get Gujarat too

JOINT GENERAL SECRETARY

SHIV PRAKASH, 54

BACKGROUND: RSS *pracharak* nominated to BJP

ROLE: Oversees party work in West Bengal, Telangana, Andhra Pradesh, Chhattisgarh, Maharashtra and Goa

SECRETARIES

SUNIL DEODHAR, 56

BACKGROUND: Former RSS *pracharak*, now in BJP

ROLE: In charge of party affairs in Andhra Pradesh; anchors party's campaign against evangelical Christian groups; anchored Jan Ashirwad Yatras

ARVIND MENON, 54

BACKGROUND: Ex-RSS *pracharak* now in BJP

ROLE: Malayalam-speaking politician from Varanasi, poll strategist with deep organisational understanding. Earlier deputed to West Bengal, and now UP

Y. SATYA KUMAR, 50

BACKGROUND: From Telangana (close relative of Vice-President M. Venkaiah Naidu)

ROLE: Dealing with administrative and organisational issues apart from party's southern expansion. Deputed to Uttar Pradesh for assembly polls

OTHER KEY PERSONNEL

VIJAY CHAUTHAIWALE, 53

BACKGROUND: Former scientist (Sr V-P at Torrent Group), president of Overseas Friends of BJP

ROLE: Anchors BJP outreach to NRIs, Overseas Citizens of India and PIOs; coordinates Track 2 engagements

ANIL BALUNI, 50

BACKGROUND: Rajya Sabha MP from Uttarakhand

ROLE: Party's chief spokesperson, works closely with top office-bearers for communications with external stakeholders

policies at the Centre and the schemes of their respective state governments.

Alongside, the BJP's poll army has recruited a whole battalion of *poornkalik vistaraks* or full-time expanders across all Vidhan Sabha constituencies. Currently, the BJP has 8,000 such recruits, of which 800 are deployed in UP alone, 120 in Uttarakhand and 100 each in Punjab and Goa. The concept is borrowed from the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh, where the full-timers, largely *pracharaks*, ensure that the party's grassroots programmes and communication are disseminated effectively.

Nadda is also refining his predecessor's booth-level strategy by constituting *panna pramukhs* (page chiefs) and *panna samitis* (page committees) in all 1.04 million polling booths, a task it hopes to complete by April next year. The priority, of course, will be the five states where elections are due early next year. "Each *panna pramukh* is expected to contact 30 voters or 5-6 families on an average listed on one page (*panna*) of an electoral roll," says Chugh. The BJP has decided to reinforce the system with *panna samitis* ahead of the assembly polls in the five states. Instead of just a *panna pramukh*, there will now be a five-member committee to contact voters in a single page of an electoral roll.

This extensive grassroots network is expected to help the BJP communicate to the electorate the Modi government's Covid vaccination efforts, social sector schemes, free ration and cash assistance being supplied to the poor and updates on the Ram temple construction and the redevelopment of the Kashi temple. Simultaneously, the party is increasing the participation of vulnerable segments like the Dalits, *vanvasis* (tribals) and backward classes in governance.

Since August, the BJP has launched three massive outreach programmes. The first was a Jan Ashirwad Yatra of newly-inducted ministers in areas other than their constituencies. Then, there was the Azadi ka Amrit Mahotsav, to celebrate the completion of the PM's 20 years in public office. In addition, there is the BJP's ongoing Sewa Hi Sangathan campaign involving its cadre of 1 million healthcare volunteers. Trained and deployed for the BJP's Har Ghar Dastak programme, their job is to ensure that the country gets fully vaccinated.

Nadda has also introduced changes in the functioning of the leadership at the central and state levels. For the party's national general secretaries, for instance, the system of 'Chakri Pravas' or rotational tours has been introduced. All nine general secretaries are expected to tour the states they are in charge of.

THE HIGH COMMAND HAS MADE EVIDENT ITS THRUST ON A YOUNGER, SAVVIER LEADERSHIP, WHICH IS WHY IT HAS RUTHLESSLY REPLACED CHIEF MINISTERS IT THINKS HAVE FALLEN SHORT OF EXPECTATIONS

"Apart from checks and balances, it helps party workers gain a new perspective," says a top party leader. At the state level, all presidents are given a set of Key Result Areas (KRAs) they have to deliver on, which are regularly monitored.

THE BATTLE FOR UP

The BJP's chief challenge in UP is to break the jinx of no chief minister returning to power in the past six decades. The party starts with an advantage in that it has swept two general elections (2014 and 2019) and one assembly poll (2017) in the state since 2014. In the 2017 election, the BJP cornered 39.6 per cent of the vote while its nearest rivals—the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP) and the Samajwadi Party (SP)—netted 22.33 per cent and 21.82 per cent, respectively. The BJP-led National Democratic Alliance swept 49.9 per cent of the votes in the 2019 general election, an emphatic assertion of its dominance in the state. As in 2017, this time too, the BJP is banking on a rainbow of caste combinations, comprising non-Jatav Dalits and non-Yadav OBCs, while retaining its traditional Brahmin-Baniya-Thakur voters in the state. The party has made it clear that it will not replace Chief Minister Yogi Adityanath, who has emerged as Hindutva's hardline icon and draws support from its core voters. "With Modi already our star campaigner, the combination with Yogi will be a match-winner," says a senior BJP leader.

To micro-manage the polls, the BJP has divided UP into six zones—western UP, Braj, Awadh, Kanpur, Gorakhpur and Kashi—with separate in-charges for organisational affairs and election campaigns. The caste equations, priorities and requirements for representations are completely different in each zone. This segregation helps the BJP work in tandem with RSS units, which also divide their work in similar zones, and run their set of campaigns to shore up the BJP's prospects. RSS *sarkaryavah* Dattatreya Hosabale is also said to have played an active role in bridging the gap between the warring factions in the state leadership and the RSS.

To further enhance the BJP's prospects in the state, PM Modi in his July reshuffle and expansion of the Cabinet, added seven new Union ministers from the state: Anupriya Patel from ally Apna Dal, Agra MP S.P. Singh Baghel, Mohanlalganj MP Kaushal Kishore, Maharajganj MP Pankaj Chaudhary, Lakhimpur Kheri MP Ajay Mishra, Jalaun MP Bhanu Pratap Verma and Rajya Sabha MP B.L. Verma. The choices also reflect the BJP's balancing of caste equations as Patel, Chaudhary and B.L. Verma are OBCs; Baghel, Kishore and Verma are Dalits, and Mishra is a Brahmin. The BJP has also ensured that all six zones got some representation. Smriti Irani, Rajnath Singh, Sanjeev Balyan, V.K. Singh, Sadhavi Niranjan Jyoti, all of them also from UP, are already in the council of ministers, besides, of course,

the prime minister himself.

At the same time, the BJP is pushing the pedal on the development and improved law & order planks. Since mid-October, there has been a spree of infrastructure projects, which have either been commissioned or inaugurated by the prime minister in the state. On November 16, PM Modi, flying in an IAF C-130J Hercules heavy lift aircraft, landed on the newly constructed Purvanchal Expressway, the 360 km highway connecting Lucknow with the eastern UP district. A week later, he laid the foundation for the international airport at Jewar near Aligarh. Earlier, the Union defence minister Rajnath Singh had inaugurated the defence corridor in UP while home minister Shah laid the foundation of state universities, at Azamgarh on November 13 and Aligarh in the first week of December, named after local heroes.

The emphasis on caste equations and development does not mean the BJP is toning down Hindutva or hypernationalism in its bid to retain India's most populous state. In this, the BJP is getting assistance from RSS cadre. They are helping the party take the message of the Ram temple construction in Ayodhya to the grassroots; in mid-November, the Sangh mobilised its cadres to organise the Ma Annapurna Yatra, celebrating the return of the idol of the goddess from Canada after it had been smuggled out from the Kashi Vishwanath temple. The idol travelled through the 230 assembly segments in the 18 districts of the state. BJP leaders deny that the party is choosing outright polarisation and claim it has a more calibrated approach towards Hindutva. After all, 18 per cent of the voters in the state are Muslim. In 2017, the BJP secured some of the liberal Muslim and female vote in many seats, which helped it sweep the poll. "Repeating 2017 appears difficult this time," a top BJP leader admits. That warning also applies to other states going to the polls. Mission 2022 will certainly be no cakewalk. ■

– With bureau reports

BANDEEP SINGH

INTERVIEW | J.P. NADDA

"THE BJP IS NEVER COMPLACENT. WE HAVE TAKEN ALL STEPS TO WIN IN 2022"

After holding an hour-long video conference with state party leaders on December 1, Bharatiya Janata Party president J.P. Nadda sat down for an exclusive interview with Raj Chengappa, Group Editorial Director (Publishing) and Anilesh S. Mahajan, Senior Editor, at his Delhi residence, in which he discussed his party's prospects and the challenges it faces in 2022. Excerpts:

Q. Five states go to the polls in early 2022, and two more towards the end of the year. What are the challenges the BJP faces in these elections, especially with regard to anti-incumbency, since your party is in power in six of these states?

In any election, there are many factors to consider, and all of them are important. Our style is to understand each state's issues—its leadership, governance, our cadre's momentum, the behaviour of opposition parties and where our party organisation in that state

stands at that moment of time. The BJP tries to address every issue—we are never complacent and we are always ready to reorient our strategy. Like, in Uttar Pradesh, this is probably the first time that there is pro-incumbency in the election. Yogi Adityanath has shown strong leadership, be it in his handling of law and order and development issues, or change at the grassroots level. As the leader of a BJP-ruled state, he has used the support provided by Prime Minister Narendra Modi for the good of the state. I feel that in the elections in February we will be able to retain Uttar Pradesh, Manipur, Uttarakhand and Goa.

Q. The BJP changed chief ministers in two states going to the polls in 2022—Gujarat and Uttarakhand. What was the strategy behind these decisions?
All our chief ministers have done a good job but, at a certain point, if it is the need of the hour, we have made changes. In Gujarat, we wanted a younger leadership in place. It's a state where we can show results too. If we don't hand over the reins to younger leaders at the right time, the party will lose its vibrancy. Experiments are a continuous process in the BJP. We are not like other parties which have become fossilised, losing their vitality and vibrancy. The BJP remains vibrant and is full of new energy and activity.

Q. The party didn't think there was need for a change of leadership in Uttar Pradesh?
There are many factors to consider. One is the youth factor— the current chief minister is young. He has many long years to serve. Number two, his cabinet is also very young. And they have done a very good job. Uttar Pradesh is going for elections with pro-incumbency sentiment. When it comes to the law and order situation, connectivity, health infrastructure and education…you can feel that there is governance in the state.

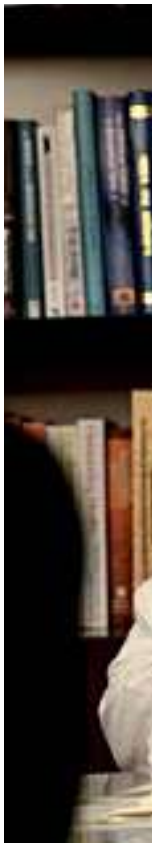
Q. Organisationally speaking, what else have you done in recent months to energise the party?
Well, Amit Shahji made the BJP the world's largest party. It was my duty to consolidate and strengthen it. So, we had to start a two-way communication with our 180 million primary members. We also wanted to make their contribution in terms of involvement permanent. Then, in 850,000 of the 1.04 million polling booths across the country, we have booth *pramukhs* (chiefs) and *panna pramukhs* (electoral roll page chiefs), and are now appointing *panna samitis* (electoral roll page committees) so that there is a connect with every voter. All this will help us gauge the mood at the grassroots and work accordingly. Our broad ideological framework is '*sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas, sabka prayas* (everyone together, everyone's development, everyone's faith, everyone's effort)'. We are already doing *sabka vikas*; there is a need to win *sabka vishwas* and involve everyone in the *prayas*. This is not possible unless you have person-to-person contact.

Q. You have employed technology in a big way…
Yes, we have set up WhatsApp groups at the *shakti kendra* (power centre) and booth levels, and have been providing them with content—40 per cent of it on national issues, 40 per cent on state issues and 10 per cent each on district and local area level issues. The content changes on a weekly basis. We provide them information and seek comments and feedback. We also have e-*vistaraks* (community builders)—they go to villages, connect with people at the booth level and feed in their names, phone numbers, etc. into a database. We take feedback from the e-*vistaraks*. By communicating digitally, we save time as well as retain people's faith in us.

Q. Coming to current issues, was the repeal of the central farm laws an electoral decision, given the upcoming Uttar Pradesh and Punjab polls? What impact will it have on the elections?
As the prime minister said, the farm laws favoured the *kisan* (farmer) but, somehow, we were unable to put this across. The prime minister decided to withdraw them as we did not want the situation to persist. As far as elections are concerned, from the day the farm laws were enacted to the day of their repeal, the BJP won every election—right from Ladakh to down south, from Kutch to the extreme northeast. So, election was not the issue.

Q. But you lost in West Bengal?
Yes, but our vote share in the state increased from three to 38 per cent within three years. I consider this a victory. During counting, the state machinery did not allow our counting agents to remain at the counting centres after noon. Three of our offices were set on fire at 2 pm. So, I don't consider it to be a victory for the Trinamool Congress. Hold an election any day without them being in power,

> "People understand that under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, the economy is going in the right direction, at a good pace. He is seen as proactive and sensitive to the aspirations of the people"



BANDEEP SINGH

> "In Uttar Pradesh, there is pro-incumbency. Yogi Adityanath has shown strong leadership, be it in his handling of law and order and development issues, or change at the grassroots level"

and we will show you a victory. In West Bengal, we are fighting in a democratic manner within an undemocratic process.

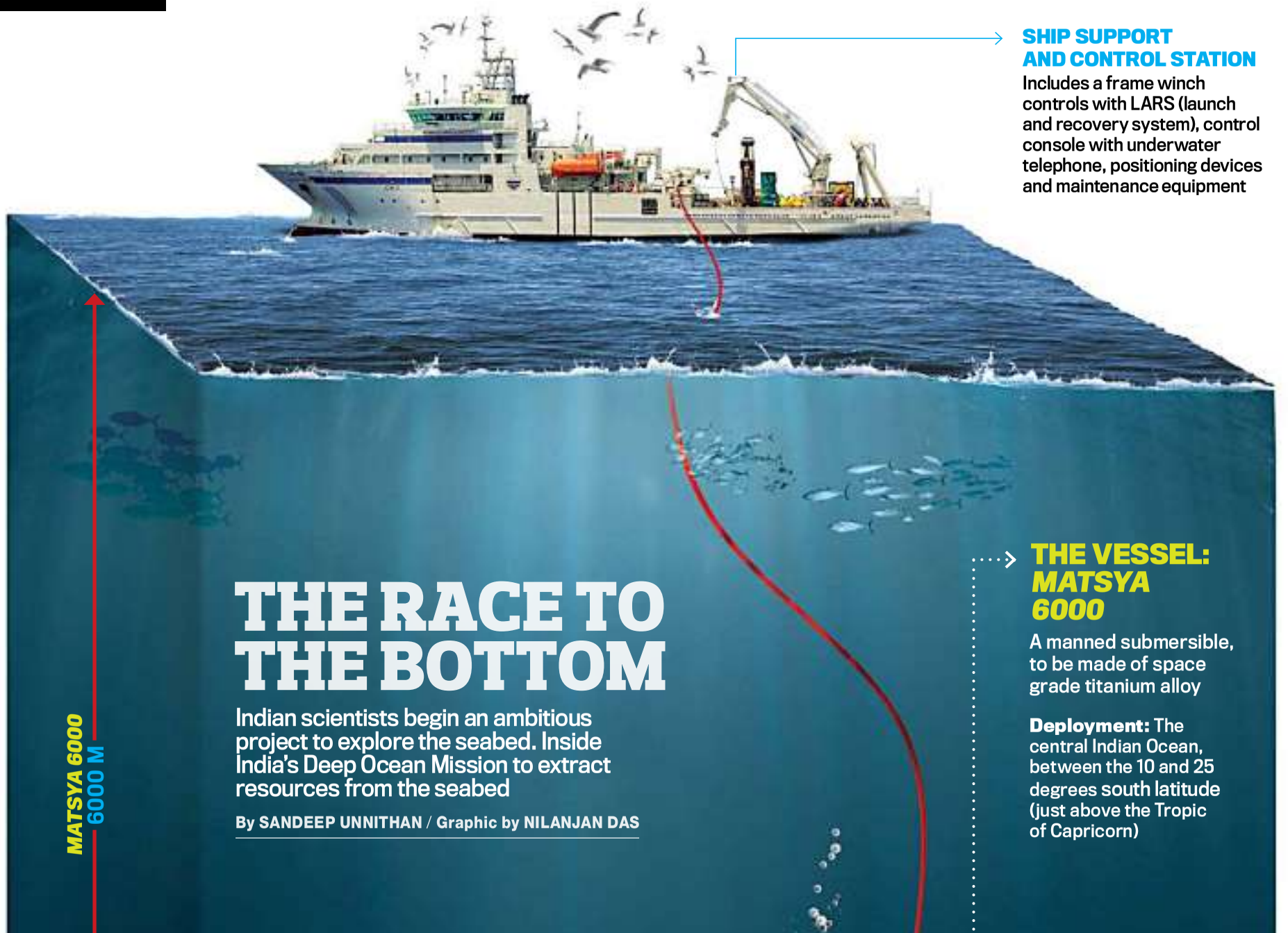
Q. Mamata Banerjee is trying to expand the Trinamool Congress (TMC) into Goa and the northeast. How big is the challenge for the BJP?
We neither overestimate nor underestimate anyone. But the TMC's style of functioning and its ideology will not be acceptable in any of the states.

Q. In UP, where Muslims account for 18 per cent of the population, what is your approach for their involvement? Will Muslim leaders be given tickets for the elections?
There are two things to consider here. Elections are a game to be won. Tickets are given to those who we think could win. If we don't think they can win, we give them a place in the Rajya Sabha or as an MLC (member of legislative council). So, as far we are concerned, we follow the principle of '*sabka saath, sabka vikas, sabka vishwas, sabka prayas*'. We didn't create any division in terms of religion in Ayushman Bharat, or in the Pradhan Mantri Awas Yojana, or the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Anna Yojana.The task of delivering the benefits to a maximum number of beneficiaries has been done by us—the BJP governments at the Centre and the states.

Q. Caste continues to play a big role in the BJP's electoral strategy, particularly in UP?
Don't take it as caste factor. Take it as '*sabka saath*', national integration, national aspiration, national objective, along with regional aspirations. A balance between all these is the sign of a strong nation. Being a strong nationalist party, it becomes our responsibility to give representation to every section of society. How else can we translate this? It is not the caste system—it is an integration system, an integration effort.

Q. The economy remains under stress, with unemployment and inflation at high levels. Will this impact the BJP's electoral performance?
Firstly, if you look at the revival of the economy after the pandemic, India has shown one of the best economic results in the world. The IMF has projected 9.5 per cent GDP growth for India in 2021. And we have clocked 8.5 per cent growth in two continuous quarters recently. Secondly, people, at large, understand that in these circumstances, under the leadership of Prime Minister Modi, the economy is going in the right direction, and with a good amount of pace. The prime minister is seen as proactive and sensitive towards the aspirations of the people. See how fuel prices were lowered by the Centre, and how BJP-ruled states followed by reducing VAT (valued added tax).

Q. The second wave of Covid was particularly devastating. How much has that dented Brand Modi or the BJP?
The situation was unprecedented. Unimaginable. But the government provided oxygen and PSA plants within a short span of one week, and increased oxygen supply from 3,000 metric tonnes to 9,000 metric tonnes. So, our image has not been dented. Rather, people understand that even in such circumstances, Prime Minister Modi was serving the people. And then look at the massive vaccination drive that was carried out. All this has shown that the prime minister is a doer. ■



THE RACE TO THE BOTTOM

Indian scientists begin an ambitious project to explore the seabed. Inside India's Deep Ocean Mission to extract resources from the seabed

By SANDEEP UNNITHAN / Graphic by NILANJAN DAS

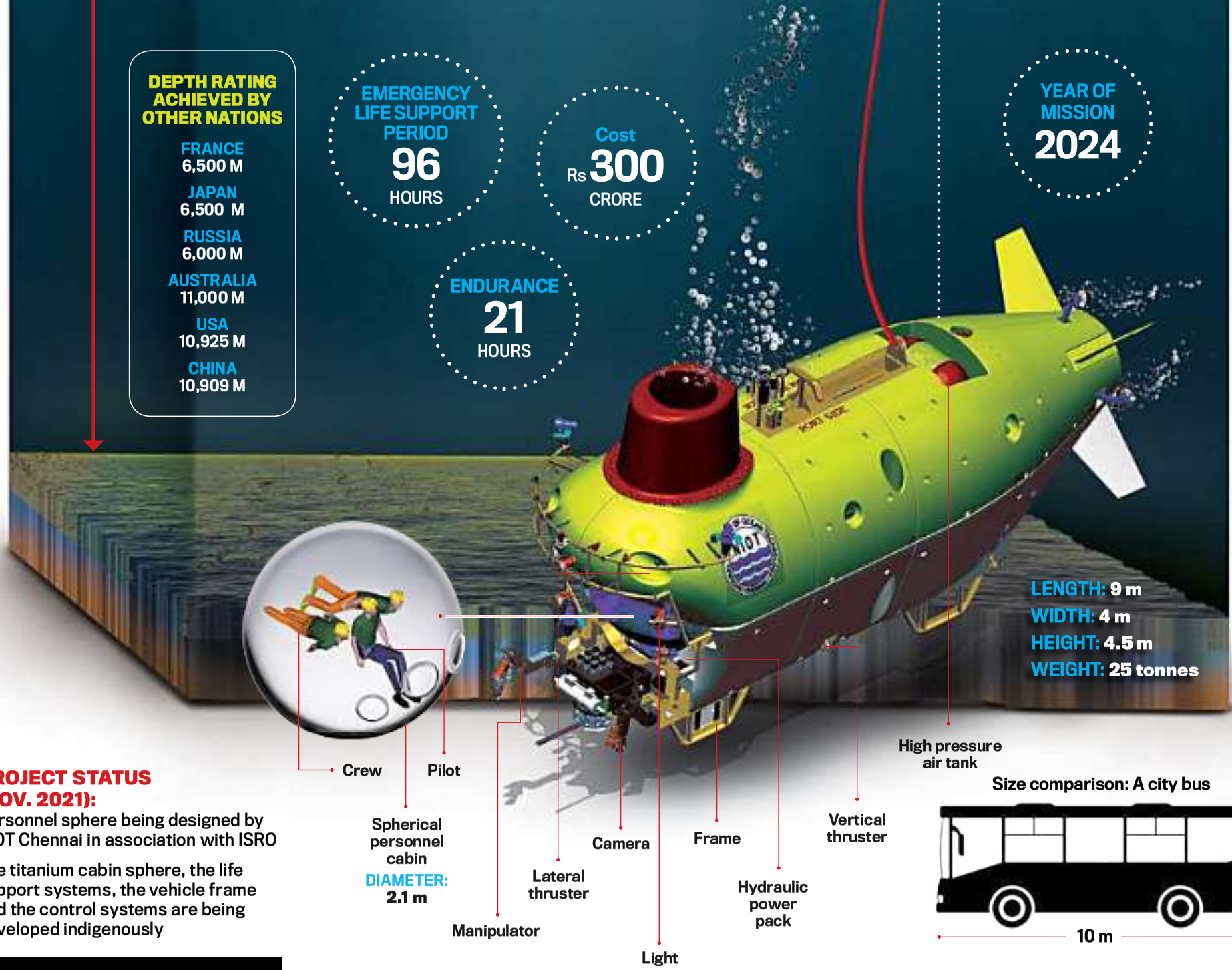
SHIP SUPPORT AND CONTROL STATION

Includes a frame winch controls with LARS (launch and recovery system), control console with underwater telephone, positioning devices and maintenance equipment

THE VESSEL: *MATSYA 6000*

A manned submersible, to be made of space grade titanium alloy

Deployment: The central Indian Ocean, between the 10 and 25 degrees south latitude (just above the Tropic of Capricorn)



PROJECT STATUS (NOV. 2021):

Personnel sphere being designed by NIOT Chennai in association with ISRO

The titanium cabin sphere, the life support systems, the vehicle frame and the control systems are being developed indigenously

ONE SMALL STEP...
Union Minister for Science Dr Jitendra Singh at the Samudrayaan flag-off ceremony on October 30

SOMETIME IN 2024, ABOARD a research vessel in the mid-Indian Ocean, three Indian scientists will board a yellow titanium submersible called the *Matsya 6000*. This 25-tonne vessel, named after Lord Vishnu's fish avatar and roughly the size of a mini-van, will then be hoisted off the ship and dropped into the water to begin its journey to the ocean depths. Tethered to its mothership by a cable, *Matsya* will descend well past the 100 metre mark, beyond which sunlight does not penetrate and the ocean becomes as dark as a tar pit. The vessel's rapid descent will continue for around four hours, after which it will land on the Indian Ocean floor. The water pressure at this depth—600 atmospheres—is roughly equivalent to the weight of an elephant per square inch. From inside the cramped confines of the submersible, the scientists will turn on *Matsya*'s outer lights to illuminate the pitch dark, and move about the sea floor for around six hours, studying the environment through acrylic viewports and using crablike robotic arms to scoop up samples.

This will be India's first crewed underwater mission. It will make India only the sixth country, after the US, Japan, France, Russia and China, to deploy such deep-diving manned submersibles. Uncrewed NIOT (National Institute of Ocean Technology) machines have already visited these depths in the past. Between March and April this year, the NIOT ship *ORV Sagar Nidhi* deployed the *Varaha-1* robot into the central Indian Ocean. The tracked, mini tank-like vehicle crawled the seabed at a depth of 5,270 metres for its mission to study the polymetallic nodules found here. This was the deepest dive by an Indian machine so far. The *Varaha* mission was a validation of the system's onboard electronics and its mechanical and sonar systems at these depths. With these trials, India crossed a significant milestone, becoming the first country to demonstrate a complete system of seabed locomotion at these depths. The previous record was held by the US—in the 1970s, the *Glomar Explorer* had deployed such crawlers to a depth of 4,000 metres.

On October 30, Union Minister for Science (independent charge) Dr Jitendra Singh, formally flagged off the Rs 4,000 crore Samudrayaan Mission (also known as the Deep Ocean Mission). The Mission had been launched in 2018 in project mode. The latest flag-off marks the conversion of the programme into government-supervised mission mode. "This is only one part of our six-part Deep Ocean Mission, but it will be the most challenging one because lives are involved," says Dr M. Ravichandran, secretary, MoES (Ministry of Earth Sciences).

THE GOLDMINE ON THE SEABED

The Chennai-based NIOT has already completed the preliminary design of the *Matsya*. Production will involve assistance from institutions like ISRO (the Indian Space Research Organisation), IIT Madras, the DRDO (Defence Research and Development Organisation) and private sector conglomerates like L&T. The vessel's most crucial part, the space-grade titanium sphere in which the three aquanauts will sit, is being designed by ISRO's Vikram Sarabhai Space Centre. A stainless steel version has already been fabricated and tested to a depth of 500 metres. Life support systems, the vehicle frame and control systems, the acoustic communication system, underwater positioning system, sea water pumps and manipulator arms are being designed indigenously. However, as NIOT director Dr G.A. Ramadass clarifies, "While many components are being designed indigenously, they are being sourced from the international market as it is not practical to set up

industries for just a handful of vehicles." The agency will begin testing its stainless steel sphere at greater depths next year and hopes to start building the *Matsya* by early 2023. The department will be talking to Russia's Krylov State Research Centre for the spherical titanium hull, an ocean simulator and deep sea components, and to the US-based Woods Hole Oceanographic Institute for pre-mission inspections.

But why send aquanauts when robots can do the job? The answer has to do with the challenges of operating on the seabed. For one, it is easier to communicate with an orbiting spacecraft than it is with an uncrewed robot on the ocean floor. Because electromagnetic waves cannot penetrate the great oceanic depths, robots have to be connected to their motherships using long, heavy underwater cables, which limits their reach. Secondly, autonomous underwater vessels cannot be manually controlled, and the data they gather cannot be viewed in real time. The information sent and received by these cables is also vulnerable to the temperature and density of the seawater. "If you send down a crewed submersible, both are achievable," says Ramadass.

The *Matsya* and the *Varaha* are, in a sense, what ISRO's GSLV rockets from the early 2000s were to Indian space exploration missions—demonstrations of technologies critical to future missions. They are part of a larger plan to explore the seabed for industrial resources. The seabed is a rich source of minerals like copper, zinc and phosphorous, as well as precious metals like gold and silver. Two other resources—cobalt and nickel—are crucial for building batteries that will power e-vehicles. The Samudrayaan Mission calls for exploration studies of the seabed to prepare for commercial exploitation of such resources in the near future. However, this will begin only after the International Seabed Authority (ISA), a UN body, evolves a policy for seabed mining; currently, only exploration is permitted.

Matsya and *Varaha* are to ocean exploration **what ISRO's GSLV rockets were to space exploration—** demonstrations of key technologies

One of the major aims of the project is to develop reliable indigenous technologies to solve the various engineering problems associated with harvesting underwater resources from India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). At 2.3 million sq. km, India's EEZ is about two-thirds of the country's land area. The Chennai-based NIOT, an autonomous society under the MoES, was set up in 1993 specifically to lead this race for ocean floor resources.

The US ushered in the age of deepwater exploration with the *Alvin*, built in 1964 and rated for a depth of 4,500 metres. Over the past two decades, China has launched a robust deepwater exploration programme—last November, its manned submersible, the *Fendouzhe*, bottomed at 10,909 metres, the deepest part of the Marianas Trench. India's programme is modest in comparison and restricted so far to the Indian Ocean Region, where it was allotted an operational area of 150,000 sq. km in August 1987. This has since been reduced to 75,000 sq. km. India also signed a 15-year contract with the ISA in 2002 to explore for polymetallic nodules in the Indian Ocean. This contract has been extended to 2022 and government sources say they are working to extend it further.

Nearly two decades ago, scientific samples were extracted from the ocean floor by the Goa-based National Institute of Oceanography. The Institute of Minerals and Materials Technology at Bhubaneswar has already tested batteries made from the cobalt extracted from the ocean bed. Development of an integrated mining system will be key. The NIOT is working on the development and testing of a nodule pick-up and pumping system at the mining site—this includes systems to pump crushed nodules from 6,000 metres below sea level to the mothership and a tube called a 'flexi riser' to transport minerals to the surface. It will later adapt this system for different resources and, finally, work on scaling it up. The key to sustained seabed mining, however, is commercial viability. Ballpark estimates suggest industries will need to extract at least 3 million tonnes of minerals from the seabed annually for it to be profitable. This is why NIOT is trying to get Indian industry interested in seabed mining. Beginning next year, it will start an active outreach, offering all its seabed data to firms to encourage them to seriously commit to future resource mining. The manned submersible is crucial to this.

Once the *Matsya* is perfected, scientists hope it can be deployed for other tasks, such as scouring the oceanfloor for minerals—"Like looking for precious needles in a very large [haystack]," as Dr Ravichandran puts it. ■

Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami launching 'Apni Sarkar portal' and 'Unnati portal'

EXCELLENCE OF GOOD GOVERNANCE IN UTTARAKHAND

Transparency is a prerequisite for good governance. Keeping this in mind, the Chief Minister of Uttarakhand Pushkar Singh Dhami has launched 'apni Sarkar portal' and 'unnati portal'. With these portals, the base work for transparent and accountable administration has started. The Pushkar Singh Dhami government of Uttarakhand is very sensitive towards solving the problems of common people. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami has given clear instructions to the officers to not to keep the issues related with common public pending. After the instructions of Chief Minister, officers are reaching to the common man to listen to his problems. The simplification of the problems is being done with the help of technology and other systems, then there are efforts to solve them and finally officers are focusing on disposal of the issues. Confidence has been developed between common people and the state government with the help of this three level system. The Pushkar Singh Dhami government is turning the message of pandit dindayal Upadhyay of antyodaya into reality with good governance.

The people of Uttrakhand have got rid of running from pillar to post in government offices for solving their problems. Common man can take online benefit of 75 services related to nine departments while sitting on home through the help of 'Apni Sarkar portal'. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami gave the gift of 'Unnati portal' and 'Apni Sarkar portal' to the people of Uttarakhand on 17th November. 'Apni Sarkar portal' is result of the great initiative taken by Uttarakhand Government fulfilling the Prime Minister's vision of 'minimum government maximum governance'. This initiative is unique in state. Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami launched the 'Apni Sarkar portal' and 'Unnati portal' in a function organised in IRDT auditorium. On this occasion, Chief Minister Pushkar Singh Dhami said that with start of these online services, people will be able to get necessary certificates in easy manner and they will also save their time and money. All certificates will be unified and saved in digilocker. Chief Minister said that under the leadership of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the country is developing fastly. Country has made its own recognition on international level. In the last seven years, there has been rapid change in the work culture in the country, technology is expanding fastly and schemes are being implemented, keeping in mind the last man of the society.

> "Third decade of the 21th century belongs to Uttarakhand."
>
> – Narendra Modi
> Hon'ble PM, India

ACCOUNTABILITY WILL BE INSURED

'Apni Sarkar portal' will not only solve the problems related to the common man in getting the certificates and other services but will also end the unnecessary obstacles by making the departmental work procedure easy and convenient. The portal which has so many specialties, will ensure the accountability of all officers and employees with the supervisory

"With the blessings of common people, strong will power of the government, special attachment of Prime Minister Narendra Modi and assistance from central government, Uttrakhand is fast moving on the path of development."

— Pushkar Singh Dhami Chief Minister Uttarakhand

process, resulting in a system which will continue to run in transparent and accountable manner. The moment any citizen applies for any document through this portal, everything will take place under the supervision of competent officer. From patwari to tehsildar, district magistrate to chief secretary and from principal secretary to even chief minister, all are part of this monitoring system, which makes it clear that 'Apni Sarkar portal' will not only bring the Uttarakhand government to the door steps of common people but it will also fulfill the promise of accountable administration.

SAVING TIME AND MONEY

To get the benefit of 'Apni Sarkar portal' you just need to go on eservices.uk.gov.in address and need to fill the necessary information like name, address and mobile number on clicking the concerned service. If anyone doesn't carries mobile then he or she can apply with the help of nearest common service centre for any particular service. With the help of this portal, people living in different regions of Uttarakhand can apply online and get the certificate in a time bound manner. The applicants will not need to run to different offices and tahsil for their work. This will not only save the time of the concern person but will also save the money needed to go to different offices. Earlier applicants were needed to fill offline application and then for minor mistakes they had to run to the offices. Through this system they will get rid of such problems. With the help of this portal, common people can get the benefit of different schemes and services and it will also promote the digital service. People will be more aware to internet and they will be able to do their work by through laptop and mobile at sitting their homes. First time the common people will get benefit of e-filing system at large scale through this service.

ONLINE MONITORING SYSTEM

While on one hand from secretary to chief secretary and even Chief Minister will be connected to the 'Unnati portal', on other hand all heads of various departments will also be connected with this platform. The moment any proposal comes on this portal, the process of its disposal will start online immediately. One will be able to see the progress of various schemes of Central Government on this portal online. For example, if there is any scheme related to any construction, then its proposal will come to this portal from the concerned department. All concern officers will move the e-file while adding their respective notes. In this way, the decision on the schemes can be taken in a time bound manner and its monitoring will also be done. To curb the adulteration in food items and medicines, the food security and industrial administration department of state government has launched a portal. With the help of this portal, one can track the arrival and result of the samples of medicines and food products once they reach the laboratory.

THESE SERVICES ARE NOW ONLINE

REVENUE DEPARTMENT

Permanent residence certificate, Character certificate, Haisiyat Certificate, freedom fighter certificate hilly area certificate succession certificate caste certificate income certificate

PANCHAYATI RAJ DEPARTMENT

Adding new family, Family register copy, Family separation, Family amendment, Birth certificate, Death certificate, NOC for personal home construction, Toilet certificate

SKILL DEVELOPMENT AND EMPLOYMENT DEPARTMENT

Employment registration, Registration eligibility amendment, Employment registration renewal

URBAN DEVELOPMENT DEPARTMENT

Birth certificate, Death certificate

SOCIAL WELFARE DEPARTMENT

Old age pension, Disability pension, Widow pension, Disability maintenance assistance, Farmers pension, Teelu rauteli pension, Destitute pension, Dwarf pension, Assistance for marriage form.

FISHERIES DEPARTMENT

Application for fisheries card, Approval of the proposal of construction or renovation of pond, Availability of input for pond construction, Distribution of fish seed, Distribution of fish food, Financial assistance after getting the least for fish farming, Angling

PEYJAL DEPARTMENT

New water connection, Water connection from 14 mm to 50 mm, Application for sewer line connection

LABOUR DEPARTMENT

Registration under shops and commercial establishment Act, Registration under motor transport workers act, Registration under contract labour act, Registration under buildings and other construction workers act, Registration of establishments under workshop act, Registration of establishments under boiler act, Registration under inter state migrant workers act

POWER DEPARTMENT

New power connection, Power connection cancellation, online payment grievance, Failure of power supply, Problem in power supply, other wss grievances

LEADING LADY

Falguni Nayar, founder and CEO of Nykaa, is redefining the language of beauty in India. After a bumper IPO, India's first woman-led unicorn to have gone public is preparing to expand across categories. What the queen of beauty needs to watch out for as she takes the next big step

BY SHWWETA PUNJ | *Photo Montage by* BANDEEP SINGH

Her office in Okhla, New Delhi, like the lady herself, is matter of fact. No grand art or statement furniture, just a basic, no-frills, functional space. When its owner, Falguni Nayar, walks in, on a nippy November morning, she is in a breezy floral sari, by no particular famous designer, wearing sensible block heels, toting a purse and a jute bag with her lunch.

It has only been days since Nykaa's stunning IPO (launched on October 28, and oversubscribed 80 times), and the 58-year-old Nayar has been ajudged India's richest self-made woman billionaire (with her company valued at $14 billion, or Rs 1.05 lakh crore, as of November 10, more than the likes of Coal India, Hindalco and Godrej) in the Bloomberg's Billionaire Index, wresting the crown from Kiran Mazumdar Shaw. She wears the laurel lightly, because, for her, this is not end of a journey but just its beginning.

Nayar's story, thanks to FSN E-Commerce Venture's (Nykaa's parent company) sensational debut on the bourses, is by now a familiar one, recounted endlessly in the media. Born in a Gujarati family settled in Mumbai—her father ran a bearings company with her mother's help—business ran in her blood, and trade and investment talk was part of normal family conversation. Always a bright student, her education and career took an expected trajectory—education at the Sydenham College of Commerce & Economics in Mumbai, graduation from the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad, where she was part of the Class of 85, which also included Harsha Bhogle. She began her career at A.F. Ferguson and

Nykaa in Numbers

APRIL 2012
Birth of Nykaa

Seed Funding
Rs 42 lakh
Lead investors: Falguni Nayar, Sanjay Nayar, Omprakash Nayar and Rashmi Mehta

JULY 2014
Series A Funding
Rs 20 cr
Lead investors: Angel investors Indra Banga and Harindarpal Singh Banga

JULY 2015
Series B funding
Rs 59.6 cr
Lead investor: TVS Capital (institutional investor)

MARCH 2019
Series E
Rs 100 cr
Lead Investor: TPG Growth

MARCH 2020
Series F
Rs 166.6 cr
Lead Investor: Steadview Capital

Source: Traxcn

4,078 No. of national and international brands (as of Aug. 31)

20 No. of warehouses

80 No. of physical stores in 40 cities

17.1 mn Orders placed on the platform for beauty and personal care products in FY21

3,055 Influencers engaged as of Aug. 31

Source: Nykaa Red Herring Prospectus

was managing director at Kotak Mahindra Capital when she left in 2012.

Nayar was nearing a half century when she decided to take the entrepreneurial plunge. "As women," she says, "we tend to develop a mental block against entrepreneurship thinking a professional career helps a mother of young children balance life better. Entrepreneurship is a huge leap and commitment in terms of time. I knew I had to do it before I turned 50, as it would take me another eight to 10 years to reach scale."

NYKAA, THE BEGINNING

Nykaa wasn't Nayar's only idea, she dabbled in several others before hard focusing on the beauty business. She chose to self-fund the venture initially, since both she and husband Sanjay Nayar (whom she met at IIM) had a finance background (he is the CEO of investment firm KKR). Convincing investors and brands, though, was an altogether different proposition. Daughter Advaita, 32, head of Nykaa Fashion and her mother's right-hand person, recalls hundreds of investor meetings when her gritty mum couldn't get them to see value in what she was proposing.

It was the lack of their conviction that ultimately strengthened Nayar's own conviction. "It became my starting point, that entrepreneurs build something ahead of others. I wanted to build on an idea others didn't believe in. If everyone liked an idea, then there was enough competition already."

"Why beauty?" she was often asked. "It's a business that offered a lot of choice and needed to be done differently," says Nayar. "Unlike, say, at a Harrod's or Saks Fifth Avenue, where beauty occupied a sprawling ground floor space, in India it was relegated to the corner. Retail chains were selling beauty products, but even with about a hundred retail points, their turnover wouldn't touch a hundred crore. It didn't make economic sense for retailers to keep so many products. So, I decided to take the e-commerce route because it reaches the length and breadth of the country."

However, when she did decide to get into e-commerce, in 2012, she did not have one success story to follow. Flipkart, the first mover in the space, was yet to raise its first funds. But Nayar knew what she wanted: an inventory-based, domestically-owned business. "We were not ready to cede control to venture capitalists," she says. Hence, her decision to self-fund the venture initially. The company has seen 13 rounds of funding since (see *Nykaa in Numbers*), and counts actors Katrina Kaif, Alia Bhatt and Hero Group chairman Sunil Kant Munjal as investors. But Nayar and her family still own a 56.6 per cent stake even after the listing.

Nayar also opted for a pull strategy (drawing customers naturally) instead of a push one (attracting them with incentives). "We observed how beauty is sold worldwide," she says. "We also studied the specific needs of Indian customers and how to deliver them digitally. We put customer education right at the centre, even though people said it would distract the consumer and defy the 20-second rule (getting a customer to check out with a purchase in that time) of e-commerce. But we wanted to educate our customers, let them read up five times if they wanted to and not buy. Eventually, we were convinced, they would see value and buy." Nykaa's refusal of free shipping or discounting is also part of this pull strategy. "Instead of selling the wrong colour of lipstick at a discounted price, we thought it better to sell the right colour at the full price, because after buying a wrong colour, customers won't return." Advaita adds, "We are shifting the discourse from discount to style. Platforms need to have a point of view so that the consumer does not get overwhelmed scrolling through hundreds of products. I always ask my team not to tell me how many brands they have boarded but how many they have rejected."

BREAKING THE MOULD

Next came hectic travels across the world to convince brands about the India story—its demographic dividend and the untapped potential of the beauty market—and enlist with Nykaa. Canadian brand M.A.C. Cosmetics agreed, so did Huda Beauty. Thus, as brand consultant and retail expert Harish Bijoor says, "Nykaa brought pedigree to the space. In the world of Amazons and Flipkarts, Nykaa offered a curated feel." The company purchases from manufacturers and stores products in its warehouses. It broke even five years after operation and brought down the cost of onboarding a customer from Rs 1,000 to Rs 500 to Rs 300. It currently sells 4,078 national and international brands

BETTING ON GROWTH

Overall retail industry in India

2016
Rs **46** lakh cr

2019
Rs **63** lakh cr

2020
Rs **55** lakh cr

2025
Rs **91** lakh cr
(Projected)

Source: Redseer Research

India's Beauty and Personal Care market

2016
Rs **86,800** cr

2019
Rs **1.27** lakh cr

2020
Rs **1.12** lakh cr

2025
Rs **1.98** lakh cr
(Projected)

NAYARSPEAK

"As women, we tend to develop a mental block against entrepreneurship thinking a professional career helps a mother of young children balance life better"

"I wanted to build on an idea others didn't believe in. If everyone liked an idea, then there was enough competition already"

"I decided to take the e-commerce route because it reaches the length and breadth of the country"

"[Beauty] is a business that offered a lot of choice and needed to be done differently"

"We put customer education right in the centre, even though we were told it would distract consumers and go against the 20-second rule of e-commerce"

"I am inspired by business leaders who have built their businesses the right way. And building a sustainable business is something I learnt from Uday Kotak"

"We are shifting the discourse from discount to style. Platforms should have a point of view so that the consumer does not get overwhelmed scrolling through hundreds of products"

–ADVAITA NAYAR, *daughter*

through the web, kiosks, Nykaa Luxe and Nykaa on Trend. It has 80 offline stores across 40 cities, including Tier 2 and 3 cities, like Bhubaneswar and Raipur.

Nayar's handicap was that while she understood finance and numbers, she lacked a tech background. There were times when her Chief Technology Officer would quit and she would have to rebuild the team from scratch. There were other challenges too. "When we started getting more orders, we didn't have ERP (enterprise resource planning, or managing supply chain operations and procurement), we stored our inventory in a very rudimentary way, which is why we couldn't scale up. So, we had to shut down our marketing and accept less orders for two months to fix our back-end," she says. Nayar learnt a cardinal lesson here: to put resources ahead of time.

Counterfeits were another issue. For instance, Nykaa was the only online retailer selling the luxury lingerie brand Victoria's Secret, until it received communication from the company that their source was not an authorised seller. Nykaa took the products down immediately.

The pandemic has been another test. The country went into lockdown, permitting delivery only of essentials. Nykaa pivoted to offering essential personal care and hygiene products.

Nayar's latest challenge came when, shortly after its bumper listing, Nykaa reported a 96 per cent drop in profits to Rs 1.1 crore in the September quarter on a year on year basis. The company attributes this slide to aggressive marketing and advertising; their expenses grew 286 per cent to Rs 121 crore in the September quarter from Rs 31.5 crore in the year-ago period. It also reported a 47 per cent increase in revenues from operations to Rs 885 crore on a y-o-y basis.

And as Bijoor points out, "A brand is only as good as its profits. When brands increase their width, they lose depth, and if you lose depth, then there is no brand." Sustainability, therefore, will have to be Nayar and Nykaa's key focus from here on. In this, she is inspired by her former boss. "I am inspired by successful business leaders who have built their businesses the right way. And building a sustainable business is something I learnt from Uday Kotak."

As Nayar gets ready for her next innings, this time as the leader of a publicly listed company, her challenges will be more complex. In an intensely value-driven market, Nykaa will have to strike a balance between offering a fine shopping experience and satisfying her customer seeking value. It will also have to battle competition not only from global giant e-tailers such as Amazon but also niche brands that cut out intermediaries.

THE JOURNEY AHEAD

Nayar is ready. The personal care and fashion industry is expected to touch Rs 10.6 lakh crore by 2025. The Indian beauty market is expected to grow to approximately Rs 2.2 lakh crore by 2025 from Rs 1.1 lakh crore in the calendar year 2020. The Indian fashion market is estimated to grow to approximately Rs 8.7 lakh crore by 2025 from Rs 3.8 lakh crore in the calendar year 2020, according to a report by management consultants RedSeer, the agency Nykaa engaged for market research.

Going forward, Nykaa will have to continue to expand its product portfolio, further refine the shopping experience and offer value in the face of growing competition and heavy discounting. It is moving into lifestyle categories and introducing a range of products for men. "Whatever others want to do in two years, we want to do in six months," says Advaita.

For the moment, though, Nayar's rise should encourage women entrepreneurs across the world battling biases to gain access to funding or achieving scale. Data from data tracker Venture Intelligence shows that only 6.5 per cent of the total funding raised by 150 start-ups in 2019 went to those founded or co-founded by women entrepreneurs. Nayar's words, on the occasion of her company's listing, should inspire hope: "I started Nykaa at the age of 50 with no experience. I hope the Nykaa journey can inspire each of you to be the *nykaa* (heroine) of your lives." ■

WHEN LESS IS MORE

WITH MORE AND MORE YOUNG PEOPLE CHOOSING TO REJECT A LIFE OF EXCESS, MINIMALISM IS GAINING CURRENCY AS A WAY OF LIFE

By SUHANI SINGH

Samiksha Lohar practises minimalism in her home in Alibaug

In 2019, Samiksha Lohar was thriving as a social media strategist in Mumbai. However, she couldn't ignore the gnawing sense of despair every time she encountered news of growing landfills, corporations accused of contaminating rivers or farmers giving up their profession due to unpredictable climate patterns. Lohar began to reflect on her lifestyle and, aware of its excesses, decided to opt for a minimalistic way of life. She began seeking out second-hand or exchanged products over new ones and moved back to her home in Alibaug in Maharashtra's Raigad district where she began a new chapter as a regenerative farmer and permaculture designer. Lohar always aims to reuse rather than discard—worn-out clothes are turned into ropes, dusters and fences at the farm. "I am figuring out ways to get maximum use out of everything I own," says the 27-year-old. "The aim is to make stuff last and, if/ when the need arises, to buy pre-loved stuff or from local businesses and individuals." Lohar's wish is to live a "slow and conscious" life, one where "the ego associated with owning more" gets diluted, so that she can feel "less hyperactive" and "stay in the moment".

Lohar is part of a growing collective of individuals who have embraced the less-is-more philosophy. Joshua Fields Millburn and Ryan Nicodemus, who have identified as 'The Minimalists' since 2009, written four books on the subject and featured in two documentaries, describe minimalism as "a tool to rid yourself of life's excess in favour of focusing on what is important—so you can find happiness, fulfillment and freedom". The minimalist movement also emphasises not attaching sentiments to things. Instead, it prioritises objects that add value to life. It has inspired celebrities like Vir Das to strip their wardrobe down to bare minimum—eight T-shirts, two jeans, a hairband and three hats, in Das's case. In a post on Twitter and Instagram in July last year, the stand-up comedian, actor and writer detailed how he had stopped buying stuff and chosen to spend his money "on food, travel, music, experiences and books".

LIVING LIGHT AND FREE

Clinging to things is not in the nature of a minimalist. The idea of living light or, in some cases, out of a suitcase, isn't strange. Rashid Noor, a 34-year-old manager in the cybersecurity and risk management division of a company in Gurugram, does so literally and has been since 2013. He still drives his father's 12-year-old scooter and chooses to rent rather than buy. Noor's austere lifestyle initially

raised eyebrows, especially since he could afford things, but gradually, there was acceptance. "I don't buy anything I don't really need," he says. "I am at peace and feel it helps me disconnect from the fast-paced churn that most people call 'living'."

For its practitioners, minimalism simplifies life. There's no urge to subscribe to the latest trends. The minimalistic lifestyle makes it easy for choreographer Gaiti Siddiqui to move places in Mumbai (since there is less to pack) and get ready (since there is less to choose from). Every six months, she goes on a wardrobe cleaning spree and calls over her dancers to give away the barely-used stuff. "The more you hoard, the more attached you get," she says.

RAJWANT RAWAT

Noida-based lawyer Ambika Mathur poses in a dress she thrifted while holding up another thrifted purchase

Gurugram-based Rashid Noor with most of his wardrobe in a single suitcase

"I give away 10 things and then buy one. I find it therapeutic." Gaiti has stuck to one brand of perfume since 16 and her make-up is limited to kajal, eyeliner and lipstick.

DECLUTTERING SPACES AND MINDS

The Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing lockdowns led to larger conversations about the fragility of the environment. Cooped up at home, there was ample time for one to be aware of living spaces, of the crammed cupboards and cabinets. Inevitably, the idea of decluttering caught on. Some like Sheetal, a homemaker from Pune, roped in professionals like Gayatri Gandhi, a KonMari expert who runs a decluttering service called Joy Factory, to sort their homes out. The KonMari method, popularised by Japanese organising consultant and author Marie Kondo, states that messy surroundings have an impact not just on one's physical environment but also on their mental wellbeing. It encourages parting with things that do not "spark joy".

Gandhi's business soared during the pandemic as she went virtual, offering one-on-one consultations and conducting workshops. "Being at home made people aware of the paucity of space, not because the spaces are small but because of the excess stuff making the place look and feel small," she says. At Joy Factory, Gandhi applies what she labels as the 'C2S2 formula': collect, choose, scrap and store. Through it, Sheetal cut down on 50 per cent of her wardrobe and parted with books, utensils, toys and souvenirs she had held on to for years. A chunk of it was donated to Goodwill India, an organisation that collects used items and distributes it among the underprivileged after due processing. "I used to get anxious about having someone over and about what they would think of my place," says Sheetal. "Now if people come over, my house is presentable or can be made so in a few minutes. Plus, when the quantity is less, things are easily visible and put to more frequent use."

TWICE IS NICE

For some, beyond decluttering, global warming and waste weighs on their minds. A 2019 YouGov survey noted that more Indian shoppers, especially millennials and Gen X, value sustainable manufacturing standards while buying clothes. With fast fashion equated with being unsustainable, practices like thrifting have caught on. Thrifting involves giving clothes a second lease of life, a concept not entirely alien in Indian households where kids often wear hand-me-downs of elder siblings or cousins.

Anna Thomas, who works with the NGO Guardians of Dreams in Bengaluru, spent the first

Mridula Pai, co-founder of Mono, a multi-designer store in Kolkata and thrift label Love Me Twice

Abhinav Arora and Ishita Gupta, who are planning a minimal, sustainable wedding in December

GETTING THRIFTY ▸ *A shopping guide for the thrifting enthusiast*

↘ LOVE ME TWICE
"The pre-loved revolution is catching on, and quickly," says Mridula Pai, co-founder of the thrift label which offers a curated range of clothing and accessories from various brands and designers. During the festive season its collection of pre-owned saris was a huge hit.

↘ REBRAND.ED
During the lockdown, Mansi Arora, 21, got a dog. Aware that upkeep of pets can cost quite a bit, she came up with an innovative way to earn money. She started an Instagram account to sell her unused clothes and later expanded to include one-of-a-kind pieces she found in Sarojini Nagar, New Delhi. Arora, who now makes Rs 40,000 per month through the handle.

↘ CRIMSONLOSET.BLR
Camaara Fareed had an "endless amount of clothes" she was selling to thrifters online before she started her own business in September 2020. A year and two months later, Fareed, a third year college student in Bengaluru, has people from across India selling and buying things via her Instagram platform.

↘ LADYBIRD.IN
The lockdown gave Gurugram-based Latika Sharma the time to do what she had always wanted—declutter her wardrobe. The 23-year-old started a thrift page in August 2020, naming it after one of her favourite films, *Ladybird*, to sell her clothes. "I never expected myself to run a business where I do everything on my own," says Sharma. "It gives me a lot of happiness."

RAJWANT RAWAT

KonMari expert Gayatri Gandhi, who runs Joy Factory, a decluttering service

A GLOSSARY

↘ DECLUTTERING
The process of cleaning up which involves discarding unnecessary items and storing others in a more organised manner so that they are used0.

↘ THRIFTING
Recycling formerly owned items. The aim is to look for items in good condition at low, affordable prices.

↘ MINIMALISM
Living with fewer possessions and owning only those things that one really needs. Valuing a 'less-is-more' approach.

lockdown sifting through Instagram pages to find well-preserved second-hand clothes, shoes and accessories at affordable prices as well as to sell some of her own. "I have less guilt when I shop now," says the 21-year-old. For Ambika Mathur, too, thrifting became an interesting alternative to shopping from fast fashion brands like Zara and H&M. "Lockdown gave us time to think about where our clothes are coming from and where they are going after we are done with them," says Mathur, a 25-year-old lawyer in Delhi. Her philosophy is to make her clothes last longer, buy fewer and donate the ones she has outgrown to NGOs. For Diwali, Mathur didn't shop for new ethnic wear and instead wore her mother's sari.

Youngsters like Thomas and Mathur are choosing ethical fashion brands, factoring in things like a company's carbon footprint and even how they treat their labour force.

With thrifting comes an element of fun. Mridula Pai, who co-runs the multi-designer store Mono in Kolkata, witnessed it first-hand—her customers are drawn to the rack of "pre-loved" finds. From one rack of thrifted items in October 2019, Pai and her co-founders, Munir Mohanty and Karuna Ezara Parikh, have now allocated more space to the category and started a thrift brand and e-commerce venture—Lovemetwice.in. The venture fits in with Pai's need to build a base of conscious consumers, more so given that textile production is one of the most polluting industries, producing 1.2 billion tonnes of greenhouse gas emissions, as per a report published in the *Nature Climate Change* journal (2018). "The surprise of finding something unique at attractive prices, and the fact that one is contributing in some small way to a greener world makes thrifting a fantastic option," says Pai. It has also gained acceptance as fashion magazines feature spreads with models wearing thrift buys, breaking the stereotype that thrifting is buying shabby clothes.

THE SUSTAINABILITY WAVE

Clothes are not the only way the young are showcasing their passion for a more sustainable lifestyle. Some have forsaken flying by air to cut down on their carbon footprint and others, like Lohar, have taken to empowering local economies. Sustainability is even seeping into the wedding business. Anam Zubair, associate director, marketing, Wedding Wire India, a part of The Knot Worldwide, says couples and their families are now opting for small-scale, sustainable weddings. The driving force behind this shift, says Zubair, is consciousness among young couples. Software engineers Abhinav Arora and Ishita Gupta are one such couple. Their forthcoming wedding in December will be a small affair with just 40 guests. Not only are they buying flowers and decorations from local vendors and sending e-vites, they also plan to re-use the eco-friendly wedding decor around the house after the event.

Shopping less, discarding excess—there are several approaches to living sustainably. But ultimately what binds people is their motivation to make a difference. Most minimalism revolutions, after all, begin within a room. ■

–With Ridhi Kale and Shelly Anand

SURGING AHEAD

At the India Today State of the States e-Conclave, the leaders of the winning states shared how they ran a tight ship during the pandemic to not just sail through but to move towards a brighter future

INDIA'S TOP BIG STATES

The winners of India Today State of the States survey 2021

CATEGORY	BEST PERFORMING	MOST IMPROVED
OVERALL	TAMIL NADU	BIHAR
ECONOMY	TELANGANA	BIHAR
INFRASTRUCTURE	PUNJAB	JHARKHAND
AGRICULTURE	PUNJAB	MADHYA PRADESH
HEALTH	KERALA	HIMACHAL PRADESH
EDUCATION	HIMACHAL PRADESH	BIHAR
LAW & ORDER	GUJARAT	KARNATAKA & UTTAR PRADESH
GOVERNANCE	RAJASTHAN	WEST BENGAL
INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT	ANDHRA PRADESH	BIHAR
ENTREPRENEURSHIP	HARYANA	UTTAR PRADESH
TOURISM	KERALA	PUNJAB
ENVIRONMENT	KERALA	CHHATTISGARH
CLEANLINESS	PUNJAB	ASSAM

INDIA'S TOP SMALL STATES

CATEGORY	BEST PERFORMING	MOST IMPROVED
OVERALL	PUDUCHERRY	MANIPUR
ECONOMY	SIKKIM	MIZORAM
INFRASTRUCTURE	GOA	ARUNACHAL PRADESH
AGRICULTURE	TRIPURA	MANIPUR
HEALTH	PUDUCHERRY	MIZORAM
EDUCATION	GOA	MEGHALAYA
LAW & ORDER	NAGALAND	SIKKIM
GOVERNANCE	MANIPUR	ARUNACHAL PRADESH
INCLUSIVE DEVELOPMENT	MIZORAM	MEGHALAYA
ENTREPRENEURSHIP	DELHI	MIZORAM
TOURISM	GOA	MEGHALAYA
ENVIRONMENT	MIZORAM	SIKKIM
CLEANLINESS	GOA	PUDUCHERRY

BEST PERFORMING STATE IN HAPPINESS INDEX

BIG STATE	KERALA	SMALL STATE	GOA

The annual India Today State of the States ranking is the most credible and comprehensive study on the performance of states in India. Examining the states' progress over a dozen categories—economy, agriculture, education, healthcare, infrastructure, inclusive development, governance, law and order, entrepreneurship, tourism, environment and cleanliness—the rankings not only reflect the graph of socio-economic development across India but have emerged as the final word on the health of Indian states.

As the objective of this survey has always been to find new ways to measure the states' overall health, a new category was introduced this year—the happiness index. To calculate the score in happiness index, objective data on prosperity (per capita income, outstanding liabilities to population, CPI, unemployment rate) of a state, along with scores from its rankings in education, health governance, infrastructure, law and order, environment and cleanliness were considered.

The India Today State of the States e-Conclave, streamed live on November 28 to celebrate the winners, saw chief ministers, ministers and bureaucrats of award-winning states reveal their success mantras. Despite geographical, political and policy differences, what bound all the leaders was their unwavering commitment towards taking development benefits to every citizen in their states. There was unanimity in accepting the hard truth that in a democracy like India, people primarily expect the government to deliver public good. There was also a special speech by Harsh Goenka, chairman of the RPG Group, on why happiness matters for our collective wellbeing. India Today and the RPG Group, in a joint enterprise, have launched the Happiness Quest, which celebrates exemplary initiatives to spread happiness. ■

FROM THE WINNING CHIEF MINISTERS

Tamil Nadu
Best Performing Big State
M.K. STALIN
Chief Minister

"With Tamil Nadu being called No. 1, my resolve is to work harder to hold on to this position. With the right goals coupled with determination and hard work, Tamil Nadu can reclaim its lost glory. We will soon be at the forefront in the industrial sector, education, employment and the economic and social indices. This award is a boost for the upward trajectory Tamil Nadu has undertaken"

Bihar
Most Improved Big State: Overall, Economy, Education and Inclusive Development
NITISH KUMAR
Chief Minister

"Our government has always remained committed to Bihar's overall growth. We have registered unprecedented improvement in infrastructure, road, electricity and health. Education, social welfare, social justice and inclusive development have always been our priority. For us, development has always been a constant journey and I am determined to continue it in Bihar"

Puducherry
Best Performing Small State: Overall, Health
Most Improved Small State: Cleanliness
M. RANGASAMY
Chief Minister

"We are working for the overall development of Puducherry. Promoting tourism and industries is priority for the growth of our economy. We have set aside 16.5 per cent of the total funds for the underprivileged and are implementing several schemes, including a special housing programme, for them"

Manipur
Most Improved Small State: Overall, Agriculture
Best Performing Small State: Governance
N. BIREN SINGH
Chief Minister

"It is easy to declare policies and programmes, but the bigger challenge is to take the real benefits to every household. That's the reason service delivery has been our key focus area. I believe the ultimate barometer of governance is the satisfaction level of the citizens"

FROM THE WINNING CHIEF MINISTERS

Chhattisgarh
Best Performing Big State: Environment

BHUPESH BAGHEL
Chief Minister

"The Gandhian model of development is based on harmony with environment and nature. This is the development model Chhattisgarh follows too. We have a clear policy for environmental protection and all schemes in the state are designed keeping this policy in mind"

Sikkim
Best Performing Small State: Economy Most Improved Small State: Law & Order, Environment

PREM SINGH TAMANG
Chief Minister

"The economy had become weak because of the lockdown, but our people did not give up hope...I thank the government employees, officials, my cabinet friends, health workers and those in the legislature for their tireless efforts to overcome the crisis. Plus, the uninterrupted support from the Centre to provide free vaccines has helped our state become 100 per cent vaccinated"

Kerala
Best Performing Big State: Happiness Index, Health, Tourism, Environment

PINARAYI VIJAYAN
Chief Minister

"Kerala is moving forward by following an alternative path of development, a people's alternative. Throughout the past five and a half years, Kerala has remained a peaceful society, a safe haven for all. It is our commitment to the people and our progressive politics that has insulated Kerala from the onslaught of communal forces. We will continue in the same manner in the future"

Arunachal Pradesh
Most Improved Small State: Infrastructure, Governance

PEMA KHANDU
Chief Minister

"With active support from the Union government, the state government has massively improved the infrastructure in Arunachal Pradesh, including roads, hospitals, schools and sports complexes. The focus on digital mode has helped us achieve multiple reforms in the governance sector. Even our cabinet and secretariat run on e-mode"

Assam
Most Improved Big State: Cleanliness

HIMANTA BISWA SARMA
Chief Minister

"Mahatma Gandhi's dream was total sanitation for all. That vision found a way to be realised only when Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the nationwide Swachh Bharat campaign on Gandhi Jayanti in 2014. Following on this vision, our government is putting its best efforts to make *swachhata* a part of daily life in Assam"

Haryana

Best Performing Big State: Entrepreneurship

MANOHAR LAL KHATTAR

Chief Minister

"The award is another validation of the continuous efforts towards the state's commitment to ensure ease of doing business, provide a better skilled workforce by linking skills to school- and college-level education, and by bringing a separate policy to promote job creation in the state and many more pro-entrepreneur policies"

Himachal Pradesh

Best Performing Big State: Education
Best Performing Big State

JAI RAM THAKUR

Chief Minister

"The awards we have won are a matter of pride and honour for us, and will also motivate us to work more passionately and dedicatedly to improve the lives of residents of our states"

Karnataka

Most Improved Big State: Law & Order

BASAVARAJ BOMMAI

Chief Secretary

"We have launched a war against drugs and cybercrimes. The drug consignments we have seized in the past year are equivalent to the total volume recovered in the past five years because we have been able to penetrate the dark web and track international traffickers. For cyber crimes, we are the first state to take advantage of the golden hour. There is no need to file an FIR. With just a crime number, we are able to freeze all the accounts hacked by cybercriminals to recover money"

Rajasthan

Best Performing Big State: Governance

ASHOK GEHLOT

Chief Minister

"I'm very happy that India Today has recognised our good governance and given us the best state award for it. Be it in health, Covid management, providing free medicines and now free insurance of up to Rs 5 lakh to its entire population or improving our education standards, Rajasthan is no longer a state known only for droughts. We could achieve it due to good governance"

Goa

Best Performing Small State: Happiness Index, Infrastructure, Education, Tourism, Cleanliness

PRAMOD SAWANT

Chief Minister

"Goa successfully managed the Covid situation, with government officials and doctors working tirelessly. They are the real heroes who put the state back on track"

Madhya Pradesh

Most Improved Big State: Agriculture

KAMAL PATEL

Minister for Agriculture

"In Madhya Pradesh, we changed the procurement patterns for crops like gram and summer moong. This has helped farmers get higher price for their produce and mop up additional incomes. It is through initiatives such as these that Madhya Pradesh is on its way to realising the prime minister's announcement of doubling farm incomes by 2022"

West Bengal

Most Improved Big State: Governance

H.K. DWIVEDI

Chief Secretary

"Apart from all fiscal parameters in the state showing marked improvement, the main thrust of the Mamata Banerjee government was to improve service delivery and infrastructure, which will see higher GDP. The third thrust area was to bring in investment and ensure employment generation. The simplification of regulatory mechanisms is a step towards that, leading to ease of doing business"

SPECIAL ADDRESS

HARSH GOENKA

Chairman, RPG Enterprises

"Social welfare and economic progress lead to a state of mental and physical wellbeing, which promotes a sense of happiness in people"

"The happiness marking will further our agenda of improving the quality of personal and professional lives and elevating India in global rankings. We are hopeful that it will also trigger healthy competition between states that could have far-reaching implications on governance and development"

"The march of progress has been visible across all states in India in the past decades on key parameters like road and infrastructure, technology, governance, commerce and social initiatives for the poor"

'MY MOTHER IS MY ROLE MODEL': PRATEIK BABBAR PG 65

PRASHANT PANJIAR: THE BIG PICTURES PG 66

LEISURE

THE NEW FILM DIALOGUE PG 68

Q&A WITH ABHIJIT BANERJEE PG 70

"I AM STILL HERE"

EVEN AS **RAVEENA TANDON** RETURNS TO OUR SCREENS WITH *ARANYAK*, SHE INSISTS SHE HAD NEVER LEFT

HERE TO THRILL Raveena Tandon in *Aranyak*

The last time Raveena Tandon found herself surrounded by the snow-capped mountains of Himachal Pradesh, she changed three saris to shoot just one song. This time around, though, her brief was very different. For the Netflix series *Aranyak* (meaning 'jungle dweller' in Hindi), she was asked to sport a khaki uniform and play Kasturi Dogra, a Pahadi officer forced to cancel her leave after a murder disturbs the peace of her idyllic town.

Tandon shot for the crime thriller in Manali and Dalhousie for over two months. Ten months later, Tandon and co-producer Rohan Sippy are in Shillim, a sylvan, hilly retreat near Mumbai, where Netflix recently hosted a trailer launch for *Aranyak*. Set to stream on the platform from December 10, the show marks the streaming debut of the 47-year-old actress. *Aranyak*, Tandon adds, fulfilled her want to do work which delivers on both entertainment and message.

In the eight-episode series, we meet Kasturi Dogra, a fierce yet beleaguered officer whose family does not support her professional pursuits. "She isn't getting the emotional support she needs from them to be able to achieve what she wants at work," says Tandon. The crime thriller, she adds, shines a light on the millions of Indian women who "have a passion for their careers and want to excel but aren't given the opportunity. Many women go through the dilemma of striking a balance".

At the peak of her career, Tandon, one assumes, never suffered such problems. Daughter of a producer, she was 17 when she got a call from producer G.P. Sippy. Though she did not have any acting experience when shooting her debut, *Patthar Ke Phool* (1991), with Salman Khan, she immediately made an impression with a song that celebrated classic Hindi film pairings, '*Kabhi Tu Chhalia Lagta Hai*'. Tandon says, "*Na ek acting class ki* life *mein, na kuchh* theatre or drama [I never attended a single acting class, nor did I do any theatre]. Never took a diction or dance class and I am still here." Tandon may not have scaled the kind of great heights that contemporaries Madhuri Dixit or Juhi Chawla did in the 1990s, but she did feature in a slew of noteworthy, memorable films—*Mohra* (1994), *Laadla* (1994), *Andaz Apna Apna* (1994) and *Shool* (1999).

ARANYAK, SAYS RAVEENA TANDON, FULFILLED HER WANT TO DO WORK WHICH DELIVERS ON BOTH ENTERTAINMENT AND MESSAGE

With *Aranyak*, Tandon expands a group of 40-something actresses who are all spearheading their own shows. Next year, Netflix will release *Finding Anamika* with Madhuri Dixit-Nene in the lead. Shefali Shah, too, will be reprising her role of a police officer for season two of the International Emmy-winning show *Delhi Crime*. India, we see, is fast beginning to mirror the US where shows like *Big Little Lies*, *The Handmaid's Tale* and *Mare of Easttown* (2021) have all started to put the narratives of middle-aged women at the forefront. "There's so much awareness with a lot more people exposed to global cinema. It has broadened our horizons," says Tandon.

Talking about how OTT platforms have changed the entertainment landscape in India, Tandon mentions how filmmakers are no longer restrained by fears of box-office viability and distributor networks. "They can tell the stories they want to without feeling the pressure," she says. Tandon herself recently gave a plot she had written in 2000 for development, one which her filmmaker-friend Onir had felt wouldn't pass muster with Indian audiences.

Before she settled on *Aranyak*, Tandon had multiple offers to choose from. She says she doesn't want the show to be seen as her "comeback". She has, after all, been judging competitive reality shows on television and doing the odd film (*Maatr*, 2017). Next year, she will be seen in *K.G.F.: Chapter 2*, the second instalment of Kannada cinema's biggest film yet. Of the two more films she has in the pipeline, one is a crime thriller, also set in the hills. With her daughter now 16 and her son 13, Tandon says she has more time to devote to work. "*Mujhe khud samajh nahin aati unki padhai* [Even I can't understand what they study]," she laughs. Much like her audiences, her kids must not be complaining either. ■

–Suhani Singh

PRATEIK BABBAR IN HICCUPS & HOOKUPS (TOP) AND IN COBALT BLUE

INTERVIEW

"MY MOTHER IS MY ROLE MODEL"

With two streaming releases, *Hiccups & Hookups* (Lionsgate Play) and *Cobalt Blue* (Netflix), Prateik Babbar is back into the reckoning. The projects couldn't be more different. In the former, a comedy, he plays a dating app owner, a casanova in his 30s. *Cobalt Blue*, on the other hand, is a drama where his paying guest upturns the life of a family. With more projects lined up, Babbar is keen to live up to his mother Smita Patil's legacy.

Q. Does this feel like a seminal moment in your career?
I feel this time is very symbolic because I am back as a lead. It was something I was really looking forward to. It has been a journey, quite a ride. I have been working on my craft, trying to pick the right projects and work with the right people.

Q. There were a lot of expectations from you after *Dhobi Ghat*. How did you keep the actor in you satisfied?
There was a slump. Before *Baaghi 2*, I was contemplating if I should still continue being an actor. I am so thankful that I craved to get back out there and prove myself to the audience, my family, my friends, and to the people who wrote me off. There were a lot of battles in my personal life that I had to come to terms with. They say 'When you hit rock bottom, the only way back is up'.

Q. *Hiccups & Hookups* (*H&H*), much like *Four More Shots Please!* (*FMSP*), seems to be an adult comedy with relationships at its core...
FMSP was about women being extremely frank and confident in their choices and sexuality. The love scenes are way bolder in *FMSP*. In *H&H*, the sex is not there for shock value. It is beautifully woven into the story. The is to normalise these 'taboo' topics among families. In *H&H*, we show dysfunctional relationships do exist and find humour in sticky situations and awkward conversations.

Q. Tell us about *Colbalt Blue*. On Instagram, you called the film "special".
It's a charming film. I really hope people like it. My character may have less screen space but he is the catalyst. Because of how sensitive the subject is, I really had to step out of my comfort zone. Sachin Kundalkar [the book's author and director of the film] handheld me through the entire process. It just felt right because he is an obsessive fan of my mother. He has lampshades with my mother's face on them! I just surrendered.

Q. It almost feels like you are returning to your independent sensibilities...
I'm not against commercial cinema. I'm just being selective. My biggest role model is my late mother [Smita Patil] who strived for diversity in her career. I am doing that, too.

Q. How is 2022 shaping up for you?
I have got *India Lockdown*, where I play a migrant worker. Then there's *Bachchan Pandey* where we are all goondas and I speak Awadhi. There's season two of *Chakravyuh* and season three of *FMSP*. I am also doing a film with Taapsee Pannu in which she is sandwiched between two Pratiks—Gandhi and Babbar.■

—with Suhani Singh

PRASHANT PANJIAR

PRASHANT PANJIAR

PHOTOGRAPHY

PRASHANT PANJIAR

REELING IN Nawab of Bengal Fatheyab Ali Meerza, Kolkata; Vijay Mallya at his villa, Goa; and Malkhan Singh and his gang in Bilao village before their surrender

PRASHANT PANJIAR

THE BIG PICTURES

PRASHANT PANJIAR'S MEMOIR OF HIS YEARS IN PHOTOJOURNALISM IS ALSO A STRIKING VISUAL ARCHIVE OF MODERN INDIA

Pictures of corpses bracket photographer Prashant Panjiar's recently released book, *That Which is Unseen*. In 1981, he writes, "Dacoits were big news in Uttar Pradesh." Besieged and beleaguered, the state police had started staging encounters, killing innocents they would brand bandits. We see in Panjiar's stark photograph, a police constable stepping on a dead body. In his outstretched hand, there is triumph and a warning. Almost 30 years later, in 2010, Panjiar shoots another body, this time in drought-prone Vidarbha: "I photographed Vijay Thamke's body in the mortuary the morning after he binged on alcohol laced with pesticide, watched his family grieve, and participated in his funeral." Between banditry and farmer suicides, Panjiar tells us many stories—his own, of print journalism in post-Emergency India, but the most crucial story he narrates is that of India itself.

THAT WHICH IS UNSEEN Back Stories from My Years in Photojournalism
by Prashant Panjiar
NAVAJIVAN TRUST
₹3,000; 154 pages

Days after the 1984 anti-Sikh riots, Panjiar shoots two Sikh men whose forlorn faces tell only half the story. The other half can be read on the wall they rest against. Scribbled on it is the poignant question: "Are we not Indian?" In 2002, Panjiar again chooses to use walls as a backdrop when documenting the aftermath of the Gujarat riots. In Ahmedabad, the photographer finds that a wall has been erected to separate Jilaiwada, a Muslim locality, from Vanmadi Vanka Ni Pol, a Hindu colony. In *That Which is Unseen*, we see a Muslim boy stand against this wall with the word 'love' etched just above his head.

Though Panjiar now works independently, he writes about the years he spent working for magazines like *India Today* and *Outlook* with an unmistakable relish. His anecdotes about journalists—Raghu Rai, Shekhar Gupta, Vinod Mehta—are, of course, entertaining, but his description of journalistic life proves even more enjoyable. Panjiar, for instance, casually tells us that the dacoit Malkhan Singh had allowed him to take pictures of him and his men only after he had agreed to become their "hostage".

Panjiar's backstories, it must be said, never seem indulgent. They only make personal the pictures that an ever-ticking news cycle often forces us to forget. Part-memoir, part-photobook, *That Which is Unseen* does again introduce us to those we know—grumpy V.S. Naipaul, extravagant Vijay Mallya—but it is in the pictures of a dead Vijay Thamke, of hungry tribals in Odisha, that it becomes truly affecting. ■

–Shreevatsa Nevatia

PHOTOGRAPHY

CONSPICUOUS BY OUR ABSENCE

An ongoing online exhibition gives our experience of lockdown an unexpected poetic resonance

Of what use are edifices when empty? Or buildings when free of human presence? A new online photo exhibition bears witness to the voiding of life during our two national lockdowns which silenced the streets of India since the Covid-19 pandemic began last year. Curated by Georgina Maddox and titled *Poetry of Lived Spaces: A Brush with the Lens*, the exhibition, featuring 11 artists, is a response to lonely and deserted spaces and our place in them. Sometimes lone human figures occupy this emptiness; sometimes they don't appear in this landscape at all.

Take an image by Aditya Arya, for instance. A lone man stands in the foreground, masked, uniformed, with mop in hand. Around him are giant markers of a once-bustling Delhi mall. The photograph is an eerie reminder of the early period of the lockdown, complete with anxiety and fear about an uncertain future.

"The idea [for the exhibition] came with Shruti [Gupta Chandra]'s work. It was like a poetic canvas. Very few of the images dealt with the human form," says Maddox. Chandra, who has long photographed abandoned spaces like staircases, rooftops and rooms in heritage structures, brings an altogether different sense of darkness to her images of vacant structures in the pandemic.

Sandeep Biswas revisited familiar haunts of his childhood and youth to find that they no longer felt the same. A touch of melancholy is palpable in his images. Gigi Scaria used his phone to document everyday objects and situations, a quiet change from the city structures and urban topographies that have long marked his work. Placing the images in a circular format gives the impression of being trapped in a sameness that's hard to escape.

Shalini Passi's Leh-Ladakh images fit nicely into this Delhi-centric exhibition, bringing with them an irony—Ladakh is an already isolated location sought out by those in Delhi for peace and quiet. Shivani Aggarwal, who has always worked with objects and activities seen as "feminine"—crochet, embroidery—to give them a heroic status, started documenting, painting and doing studies of them in lockdown. "They assumed an even more heroic status," Maddox says.

POETRY OF LIVED SPACES is live on the Artspeaks India Viewing Room (Artspeaksindia.com) until March 22, 2022

If images from the first lockdown had a sense of the lyric, those from the second carried a hint of the macabre, with Scaria's photos of meat and chopped animal parts, or in Ravi Agarwal's case, a white cloth covering a red chair gifted to him by his father, signifying death. "I chose poetic images rather than photographs of dying people and bodies. I wanted to show the lived realities without shocking people, because such images can lead to numbness. I wanted the show to make space for feelings," says Maddox. ■

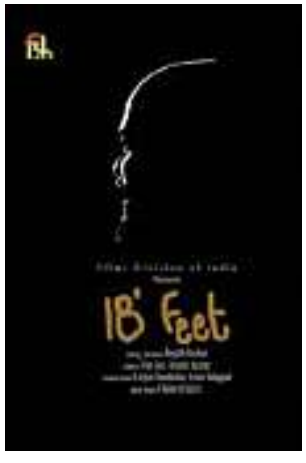
–Sukhada Tatke

QUIET FRAMES (from top, left) 'Gurgaon, 2021' by Aditya Arya; 'Between Past & Present' by Sandeep Biswas; a photo from Shalini Passi's Leh-Ladakh series; and 'Staircase of Time' by Shruti Gupta Chandra

CINEMA

THE NEW FILM DIALOGUE

Crossings, a virtual documentary festival, is kickstarting urgent conversations about cinema and society



Acclaimed documentary filmmaker and teacher at the Centre of Modern Indian Studies, Lalit Vachani admits it's hard to find a silver lining in this pandemic, given the death and destruction it has caused. However, he also says that adversity was turned into opportunity by some. Vachani started an online documentary film festival called '*Crossings*' himself. It's not something that would have happened if not for this new normal. "My colleague Karin Klenke asked me if I would be interested in a film festival, because even the DAAD (German Academic Exchange Service) mentioned they would like to be innovative in their programming. That's how we got started. Another Indo-German consortium, the ICAS:MP, came on board for funding purposes," says Vachani on a video call.

Having begun in October, Vachani and his colleagues have designed the festival like a weekly film club. Each screening is followed by a Q&A. Unlike other online festivals, *Crossings* (Crossings-cemis.org) isn't maintaining an archive for patrons to revisit if they miss the screening. The 18 films, meant to run till February next year, are categorised under brackets, namely: 'Belonging', 'Performance', 'Caring', 'Journey', 'Short Takes' and 'State'. "For instance, we screened *18 Feet* (2015) recently, and I thought it made sense to pair it with *Jahanani's Juliet* (2019). Both films talk about performance and caste. But before that, there was a film called *Oh that's Bhanu* (by R.V. Ramani) on dancer Bhanumathi Rao, where she's performing for the camera. I thought these tiny threads connecting films became a special part of programming for the festival," says Vachani. Nirmal

The online festival *Crossings*, says Lalit Vachani, was born because the world went into lockdown

Chander, whose film *Moti Bagh* (2019) was screened on November 29, says he has found a whole new audience since the pandemic. "I remember showing my 2015 film on Begum Akhtar at a screening and suddenly in 2021 we had 10,000-odd views. I wasn't even thinking of showing it anywhere," says Chander.

Ekta Mittal's *Birha* (2018), which plays at *Crossings* on December 6, echoes Chander's sentiments. "Our films gained popularity during the pandemic since they focused on migration and migrant workers. Many people asked us to screen our films in different contexts, in India as well as internationally," says Mittal over the phone. Festivals like *Crossings,* she adds, show how democratic the space has become. "It takes fewer resources to do a festival today. A lot of people can curate a list of films and assert their own politics through it."

According to Vachani, this first edition of *Crossings* would be very different if not for the pandemic allowing him to watch so many films. For instance, Rintu Thomas and Sushmit Ghosh's *Writing with Fire* that premiered at the 2019 Sundance Film Festival and has been doing festival rounds, plays at *Crossings* on December 13.

(clockwise from top, left) A still from Janani's Juliet; poster of Writing with Fire; still from Birha; from Moti Bagh; and a poster for 18 Feet

Vachani caught the film at an online festival, and reached out to the duo. "Festivals are a space to start conversations around cinema and society. Bigger festivals allow you to amplify your story, while smaller ones provide an intimate audience to engage with," says Ghosh.

However, there's one thing all three filmmakers and Vachani can agree on: nothing can replace the intimacy of watching a film with an audience. "To be with an audience, hearing the room breathe and laugh as your story unfolds on screen is nothing short of magic," says Ghosh. Vachani's vision for *Crossings* is to keep it going as a hybrid festival every two-three years, if not as an annual affair. Chander approves: "I think the future will be hybrid festivals. Their reach will increase, and they will get more hits." ■

–Tatsam Mukherjee

Documenting India

New documentaries to look out for

1232 Kms

Journalist-turned-filmmaker Vinod Kapri followed a group of migrant workers from Delhi to their hometown in Saharsa in Bihar, documenting the harsh treatment meted out to them by authorities who should have ideally helped them.

BACKSTAGE

Lipika Singh Darai looks at the dying art form of puppetry in Odisha. Her film tells the story of four sets of puppeteers, asking them essential questions: How is folklore preserved? What happens to the 'purity' of an art form when it gets co-opted?

THE BORDERLANDS

Samarth Mahajan's film premiered at the Munich International Documentary Festival, 2020. It follows the lives of six individuals and shows the violence civilians living in border areas are forced to endure.

Q+A

THE MASTER AS CHEF

Nobel Laureate **ABHIJIT BANERJEE** takes his cooking as seriously as he does economics. *Cooking to Save Your Life*, his new book of recipes, reads like a long list of awards anyone can win if they put food first

Q. You say you want to liberate our "inner gourmet cooks" with this book. What made you want to take on this project?
I love cooking. I think it is incredibly therapeutic. It is a domain where, unlike most forms of creativity, you get results fast. That helps because I'm impatient. Also, it's the only art which is unavoidable for us. We all do it, so we might as well enjoy it.

Q. You give us recipes for dishes like South Indian-style stir-fried brussels sprouts. Are these mostly culinary experiments or are you also commenting on how we live today?
No, I wasn't theorising about globalisation. I just really like ingredients and I am very mindful of them. With brussels sprouts, for instance, there are often only two ways to handle them—you either roast them or eat them raw. But I found you can also boil them and make a sambhar. That turned out nicely.

Q. What did you cook to celebrate winning the Nobel? Do achievements affect the way you cook?
I don't remember what I cooked that night, but since we don't go out to eat, I'm sure I must have cooked something fresh. I like cooking and doing other non-work things, such as playing tennis and ping-pong, in a very systematic way. But, yes, work can complement cooking. If you're in a good mood after work, you'll be a bit more ambitious in the kitchen. If you're tired mentally, your cooking suffers.

Q. The Global Hunger Index suggests not enough Indians are getting food. How do we start tackling this problem?
We haven't solved the problem of malnutrition, but in the past 15 years, we have improved in some ways. Income is a factor; more money has reached rural India; schemes like NREGA have helped. But our welfare system, I feel, may be too weighted toward food. The urban poor have no access to anything except food support. Some social welfare programmes for them would be great. But that said, if the economy revives, I think hunger will go down.

—with Shreevatsa Nevatia

Photograph by BANDEEP SINGH